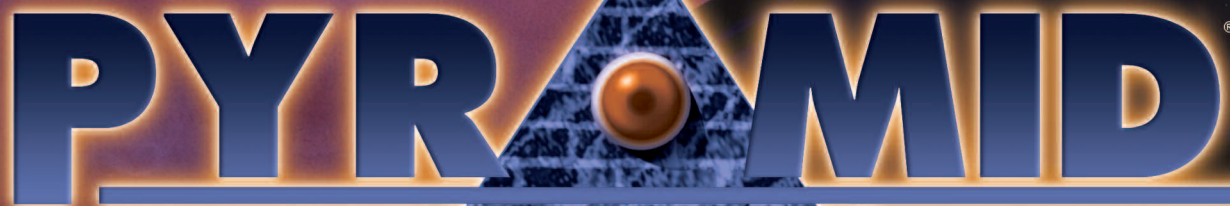


PYRAMID[®]



Issue 3/35 September '11

ALIENS



ALIEN DISADVANTAGES

by Steven Marsh

THE TROJAN GAMBIT

by Michele Armellini

MAKING SOMETHING ALIEN

by Alan Leddon

ALIEN STARTING CONDITIONS

by Stephen P. Kohler

WARGRAVE STATION

by David L. Pulver

WELL PAST ALIEN

by J. Edward Tremlett

FIRST CONTACT

by Megan McDonald

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

Pale Blue: In This Issue

Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

Dark Blue: GURPS Features

Purple: Systemless Features

Green: Distinguished Columnists

COVER ART

John Zeleznik

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Greg Hyland

IN THIS ISSUE

Whether lurking in the dunes near a desert crash or lying in wait beyond the stars, aliens have hidden in the periphery of public imagination for generations. With this month's *Pyramid*, it is time to put them in the spotlight.

GURPS provides a solid framework to build the alien of your dreams, but sometimes you can use help getting those dreams started. *Alien Disadvantages* offers new ways to look at existing traits, with tips and tricks on how to take the seemingly familiar stock tools of the **GURPS Basic Set** and make them feel out of this world.

Everyone who's suffered through a biology class learns to fear parasites . . . and those who've suffered through parasites themselves have even greater fears. However, Michele Armellini, author of several **GURPS** supplements, knows there is something potentially even scarier than being possessed by parasites. Learn the shocking truth – including a threatening race with **GURPS** stats – in *The Trojan Gambit*.

Are you looking to make an extraterrestrial's thoughts, motives, and appearance truly different? Then you need insight into *Making Something Alien*.

Do you need something to bring together a lot of alien artifacts – plus a few heretofore-unknown (deceased) aliens? Your next stop: *Wargrave Station*. This installment of David L. Pulver's *Eidetic Memory* includes **GURPS Spaceships** stats for one of the derelict vessels.

Go *Well Past Alien* with six new extraterrestrial species, suitable for any spacefaring setting. Each one is at least one aspect short of being able to easily interact with baseline humans, and each is more dangerous than the last.

Everyone comes from somewhere, and *Alien Starting Conditions* presents a quick-and-easy method for coming up with a homeworld . . . and how those roots can affect a species' outlook.

Once you have aliens, you need to make *First Contact*. This short-and-sweet collection of adventure seeds offers six ways to encounter them, plus a half-dozen ways for them to encounter *us*.

Steven Marsh has problems with aliens in his *Random Thought Table*, and the issue is rounded out by the usual fun stuff in *Odds and Ends*, featuring *Murphy's Rules*.

Whether you're facing first contact or are the last human standing, we have something to augment the alien experience. Humanity is known for its creativity – and this issue proves it!

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FROM THE EDITOR

A DUNGEON FULL OF . . . ALIENS?!

For those who've been reading *Pyramid* for a while (and special thanks to all of you who make this possible!), you may have noticed that we've been drifting away from the "past/present/future" divide of our themes. We're not avoiding issues set in specific eras, but we're also open to the possibility of issues that aren't tied to any point in time, or ones that span periods.

I mention this, tangentially, because our alien-themed issue must seem like it would be a logical science-fiction issue – which it is! However, much of the advice here is good for any presentation of the "alien" – the different, the unusual, the unearthly.

We hope you'll remember this issue when you start up a new fantasy game and are looking to inject some intrigue with a new subterranean race. Or when you're trying to produce a

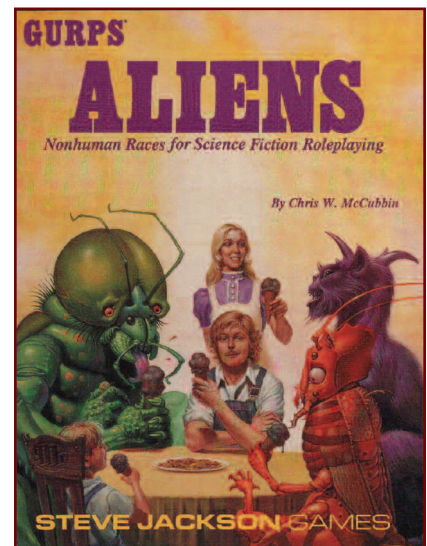
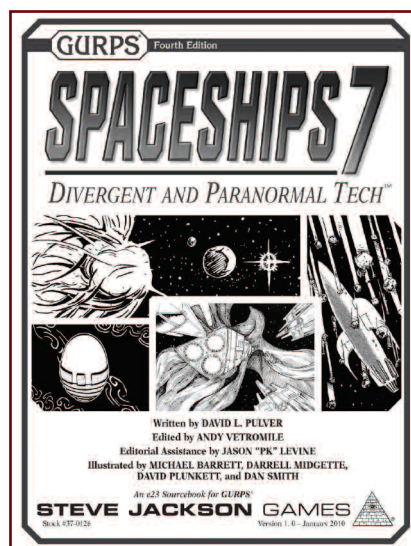
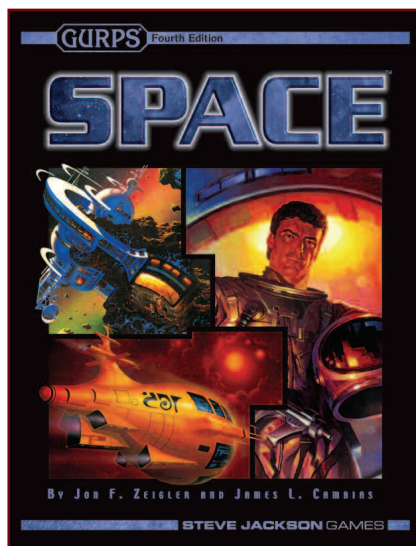
wildly different human culture in a cliffhangers campaign. And, of course, when you're coming up with a new extraterrestrial encounter.

Good gamers take their inspiration from everywhere. *GURPS* is especially great about mixing pieces . . . and *Pyramid* is a great spot for those little bits you won't find anywhere else.

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Speaking of strange visitors landing on your doorstep . . . how was this issue? You can send shadowy missives to the black-clad agents at pyramid@sjgames.com, or expose your innermost thoughts on the alien conspiracy publicly online at forums.sjgames.com.

Finally, for those looking to write for *Pyramid* – like the new names appearing in this issue did! – information is on our website at pyramid.sjgames.com.



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ALIEN DISADVANTAGES

BY STEVEN MARSH

When it comes to designing interesting aliens, *GURPS* has a dirty little secret . . . which isn't terribly little, isn't very dirty, and isn't much of a secret to folks who pay attention.

From a game-design standpoint, disadvantages in *GURPS* are most concerned with *effects*, not *causes*. In other words, the name and description of a disadvantage isn't as important as the game effects.

For the would-be fabricator of oddball extraterrestrials, this fact opens up a wide number of possibilities. Since the game effects of disadvantages take primacy over the descriptions, it's trivial to tweak the description and implications, provided the effects are the same.

The fundamentals of this technique are covered in *Modifying Existing Disadvantages* (pp. B165-166). However, as a design exercise, focusing on the *effects* and working backward to the *cause* can allow the creation of strange and interesting possibilities – ones that feel truly alien. Here, then, is a look at many of the disadvantages from the *Basic Set* – with an otherworldly outlook.

Limited Disadvantages

As described on p. B110, disadvantages can be tweaked with limitations. These can greatly change the flavor of a disadvantage . . . in a way that doesn't make sense for human-based campaigns, but that can be justified or easily hand-waved for alien beings.

From a conceptual standpoint, the easiest one to have firmly in mind when mulling over alien possibilities is “half the time” – which is worth -20%. Coming up with a good hook of why a disadvantage is only limiting half the time can lead to some interesting alien possibilities.

Remember that “limited” disadvantages reduce its value *as a disadvantage*; a -20% limitation on a -20-point disadvantage means it's a trait worth -16 points. (But see *Point Break*, p. 9, for more insight.)

ABSENT-MINDEDNESS

see p. B122

One of the central unspoken tenets of Absent-Mindedness is that the person is . . . well, absent-minded. It's somewhat assumed that the absent-minded person has the information that's slipping his mind, but can't access it – due to mental quirk or defect.

However, what if that's not the case? What if what humans call “absent-minded” in an alien entity is actually a result of a different thought process?

As one possibility, perhaps the race is a computer-based hive-mind species that “offloads processing power” of member consciousness to the greater hive. A member seems “absent-minded” because the data has been uploaded elsewhere, and accessing it requires conscious effort (the IQ, Per, or Will rolls listed in the disadvantage) to get the requested information re-downloaded to the individual.

Or perhaps the alien species experiences time in a fundamentally different fashion. Everything that isn't in the being's immediate frame of reference is mentally shifted to something akin to hazy “long-term” memory. In this case, attempting to snap out of the Absent-Mindedness feels similar to trying to remember (say) specific details of a childhood birthday party.

ADDICTION AND ALCOHOLISM

see p. B122-123

A central assumption of the substance-abuse-based disadvantages is that the addicted individual in some way consciously comprehends his addictions. However, what if this isn't the case?

As one example, maybe the alien species was uplifted by an individual with an addiction (or such an individual was – by fact or legend – a key member of the uplifting team). The race came to view “sapience” and “addiction” as synonymous: “We drink, as Founder Rosen did, so we can think.” In this case, the entire species may not recognize the problems associated with its addictions, since they've literally had them as long as they can collectively remember.

In such a scenario, outsiders may be tempted to attempt to “cure” the species by showing them there is a nonaddicted way to view the world. However, this may lead to greater complications. What if the species is well-tempered and functional through its addictions (discounting the specific problems the addictions cause, of course) – but transforms into a ruthless/dangerous/psychopathic/nonsapient race when the addiction is broken? This could lead to a challenging moral dilemma . . . especially for any heroes who fought (successfully or otherwise) their own addictions.

AMNESIA

see p. B123

Although ill-suited out of the box for most alien species, amnesia can make an interesting possibility when linked with limited disadvantages (p. 4). In particular, the -20% “half the time” option should prove interesting and playable.

Perhaps the species experiences amnesia during nighttime hours (or – for a more rational society – perhaps half the species suffers amnesia during the day and half at night). In this case, members would probably develop a system that would enable them to stay out of trouble during their affliction: “The sun sets! I must return home to avoid the night-mind!”

Or perhaps the species suffers from each having *two* minds – each separated from the other by the amnesiac wall. In this case, members may well view themselves as “guardian angels” – helping or hindering themselves, always out of their own minds’ eyes. (“Huh . . . my night-self left 20 credits in my pockets. I hope he doesn’t mind if I spend it!”)

BERSERK

See p. B124

The Berserk disadvantage is another one that works well with limitations (p. 4). For example, a species that is calm and collected for 100 hours, then susceptible to uncontrollable murderous rages for 100 hours would present a very unusual gaming challenge for spacefaring heroes. (“So long as we’re hiding for our lives, I’ll ask again – are you *sure* this guy was the *diplomat*?”)

However, there are other possibilities. As written, Berserk activates when the person with Berserk or his loved one is harmed. At the GM’s discretion, if the possibilities of “you” or “a loved one” are roughly equal, then you can remove one of those for the -20%. The most interesting one from an alien point of view is removing the personal activation; with that possibility, you would have someone who would remain calm and collected so long as he was only taking damage personally . . . but at the slightest attack against someone he cares for, he goes bug-nuts. Such a possibility would be good for a monk-like species that values solitude; they could esteem their privacy and be careful in building strong relations, specifically for the possible danger they pose if a loved one is threatened.

BESTIAL

see p. B124

The Bestial disadvantage is ideal for limitations (p. 4). If half the time you are a calm sapient being, and the other half you’re a slathering beast-man, that’s certainly alien.

BLOODLUST

see p. B125

The Bloodlust disadvantage is one where the game mechanics can be easily culled from the underlying implications. In this case, the game effects are “you try to make sure

your enemies are dead.” The underlying implications are that this is somehow considered a bad thing by society.

However, what if the species believes Bloodlust is a *good* thing? For example, their collective faith (or moral outlook) may view the mortal world as an accursed place, and the best possible outcome of this world is to die in righteous battle. In this case, Bloodlust is a sign of their respect and “love” for their fellow sapients; they’re delivering paradise, personally!

Of course, the GM may need to adjust the cost if the adventures mostly take place among other members of the race and the social implications of Bloodlust are minimal. Even so, as members of the interstellar community, such beings would *not* be viewed favorably. Where adventures generally involve other species, Bloodlust would likely be worth full points, regardless of how much “good” the alien *thinks* he’s doing!

Sense Disadvantages

Perhaps deficiencies in one or more of the senses (such as Bad Sight, Colorblindness, and No Sense of Smell/Taste) actually refer to a defect in the processing of information. For example, maybe the species suffers from brains that don’t *care* about most visual input. In the same way that some animals considered colorblind are actually capable of detecting color with extensive amounts of training, so too may the alien mind have the capability to overcome the disadvantage but not the inclination.

This works well with the mitigator limitation. Maybe the alien species has found a way for its members to elevate its visual processing units to a level similar to humanity’s, provided they have a device similar to a hearing aid implanted. (The -60% mitigator limitation doesn’t depend on “glasses”; anything that’s roughly as limiting, inconvenient, breakable, and more-or-less obvious works just fine.)

CANNOT SPEAK

see p. B125

With a limitation, Cannot Speak can represent an alien form of communication.

Example: Cannot Speak (Only when deprived of moderate light, -20%) [-12].

In this case, the alien can normally make noise, but somehow relies on light to turn those growls/trills/whatever into something resembling speech. (If the race can wear lights or otherwise compensate for this limitation, that may or may not be worth a mitigator . . . it’s up to the GM to determine how much of a pain it is to wear a night-light all the time!)

CHARITABLE

see p. B125

Like Bloodlust, Charitable is another trait where a different worldview can be represented by the same disadvantage. In this case, maybe the alien species considers those in need as potentially being the literal disguised prophet of their faith, who commanded the species to help those in despair. In this case, Charitable isn’t because of an innate goodness in the species’ hearts, but rather fear of offending the cosmos!

CHUMMY

see p. B126

From a game-design standpoint, the Chummy disadvantage's sole drawback is its penalties when deprived of outside contact. While there's an implicit assumption that this is a social or mental affliction, there's no reason it couldn't be a physical one.

In such a case, the alien species relies on close proximity to other sapients to maintain its biochemical equilibrium (or whatever other justification is used). In this fashion, Chummy could represent a psychic species that depends on mental contact, an android race that uses interpersonal contact as a means of generating a constant stream of random data, or anything suitably exotic.

The upshot of such an interpretation is that you can end up with "Chummy" aliens who don't actually *enjoy* spending time with other sapients!

Those Who Are Missing

Many disadvantages are already open-ended enough that they aren't terribly fertile ground for trying to come up with different angles. For example, Compulsive Behavior doesn't consider *why* you're doing what you're doing!

This doesn't mean these open-ended disadvantages can't be viewed from an alien viewpoint. Rather, they're too open-ended to devote much time to here. The guidelines for coming up with an alien Code of Honor or Delusion are no different than coming up with one for any other entity!

For a more-technical examination of disadvantages, see *GURPS Space*, pp. 220-224.

COMBAT PARALYSIS

see p. B127

For an alien possibility, Combat Paralysis might be linked with some advantage that only takes effect while paralyzed.

For example, a species might have some significant defensive capabilities that activates during paralysis – combining the advantages of a possum and a turtle.

Example: Combat Paralysis [-15]; DR 5 (Accessibility, Only when Combat Paralysis is triggered, -30%; Force Field, +20%) [22].

This would lead to a *very* alien outlook where it's beneficial to "freeze up." In a tense enough situation, it could be the difference between life and death – but in the opposite way that such paralysis is considered life-threatening!

CONFUSED

see p. B129

The Confused disadvantage is one that can represent all kinds of interesting alien outlooks. For example, the race might only be able to keep track of a certain number of objects at a time – maybe members recreate everything they see as mental constructs, and having larger numbers of items to keep track of means that each individual object has less detail.

Confused can also represent species that exist in a different temporal reality than the norm. For example, if the species views reality as a series of collapsing possibilities – leading to the reality that we experience – then increased stimulus means more timelines to whittle down. No wonder the alien is confused!

The upshot of going with such alternate possibilities is that Confused might actually represent a *greater* mental acumen than mere mortals possess. (You try keeping track of holographic constructs and/or alternate timelines . . .)

DREAD

see p. B132

The two core components of the Dread disadvantage are "automatic detection" and "compulsion to move away from the substance."

There are a number of possibilities a would-be alien can go with here, but perhaps the most interesting is "others of its species"! This would definitely be strange, and it'd ensure that any members the heroes encounter would be the only one around. (Of course, then it's up to the GM to devise how the species can propagate . . .)

EASY TO READ

see p. B134

As an alien twist, what if Easy to Read only applies to *other* species? In this case, the alien species may find itself in shock that its methods of subterfuge are less effective against the rest of the cosmos.

The value of the limitation required to modify the disadvantage would depend on how common it is for the species to interact with outsiders, although – as a baseline – it's incredibly similar to "Only on aliens," which is worth -30% or -40%, depending on the world (p. B110).

EXTRA SLEEP AND SLEEPY

see p. B136, 154

For an alien outlook on Extra Sleep and Sleepy, realize that – from a game standpoint – these disadvantages merely requires the person to have something *like* sleep. For that matter, even *without* this disadvantage, the rules only require that someone need a sleep-like motionless period. (Game effects for sleep – or lack thereof – are on pp. B426-427.)

As an example, let's look at a race with Sleepy that sleeps half the time (which is also the equivalent of Extra Sleep [-8]). By the rules, they need an extra eight hours of sleep a night, for a total of 16 hours. Following the guidelines of p. B154, some possibilities for how this might break down include:

- A slug-like species that needs 16 straight hours of sleep.
- A temporally unusual race that can remain active for 16 hours before their minds leave their bodies for 32 hours (although the minds can be "resummoned" in a way similar to waking someone up).
- A hyperactive species whose members are awake for one hour, then frantically sleeps for two.

*But that wasn't the case with Tweel; it was just that we were somehow mysteriously different – our minds were alien to each other. And yet – we **liked** each other!*
– Stanley G. Weinbaum, “A Martian Odyssey”

- A techno-organic species that requires eight hours of “normal” human-style sleep a night, plus eight hours of standing hibernation-recharging.

Provided the amount of time required to be inactive is roughly the same, there’s nothing that dictates “sleep” must be defined solely as “eight hours in a comfy bed with Mr. Snuggles.”

FLASHBACKS

see p. B136

As a racial trait, perhaps Flashbacks do not actually represent hallucinations of times gone by. The important aspect of Flashbacks is the potential it has to remove the sufferer from a current frame of reference.

Thinking outside the box, Flashbacks can represent literally *anything* else:

- Traumatic memories of other members of the race (either a specific member – two aliens are always linked to each other – or another random member of the species).
- Racial memories of bygone eras.
- Visions of alternate realities.

Regardless of the option chosen, none of these should be particularly *useful* . . . but they should still provide an alien experience: “Forgive me. When I am stressed, my mind retreats to 10,000,000 years ago.”

FRIGHTENS ANIMALS

see p. B137

Another good option to tie to limited disadvantages (p. 4), Frightens Animals opens up a lot of strange possibilities to help make a race feel alien. For example, maybe the species committed some cosmic atrocity sometime in the past. Animals are able to sense the truth behind this galactic betrayal and react accordingly.

INCREASED CONSUMPTION

see p. B139

In broad terms, the advice for Extra Sleep (p. 6) applies here. Provided that the material consumed is roughly analogous to “meal,” and the consumption periods are spaced far enough apart to be inconvenient, the “meals” can be anything the GM permits.

As one example, an alien species might actually be a symbiotic union of two disparate life forms. Each life form requires a “normal” amount of food, but the food needed is incompatible . . . and there’s only so much throughput that the gestalt body can use to process material. It would definitely seem alien to see a species consuming two wildly different types of food in a short period of time.

It’s up to the GM’s discretion if and how much meals can be combined in a sitting. (A good rule of thumb to consider is that most humans who try to eat all three daily-required meals at once would find themselves with a massive stomachache.) Even if the GM permits more than one meal to be consumed in a sitting, the time required should be similar to the time needed to eat each meals separately (or slower – see the Slow Eater disadvantage on p. B155).

INSOMNIAC AND LIGHT SLEEPER

see p. B140, 142

Again, by turning the concept of “success” and “failure” on its ear, even a straightforward disadvantage such as Insomniac can become something that builds alien character.

For example, suppose a hive mind relies on utilizing consciousness energy from its members. The hours of sleep lost to Insomniac are actually tapped into the hive mind to sort collective thoughts. The species as a whole manages to acquire enough hours from its racial insomnia to keep the hive mind functioning. However, individual members all find themselves with a racial need to donate sleep time to the hive; thus, members view success on Insomniac rolls (permitting sleep) to actually be signs of personal failure – they’re not contributing enough to the collective!

KLEPTOMANIA

see p. B141

What human society views as “kleptomania” may merely be a representation of another urge. For example, an alien race that views order as being vital above all else may see (or believe it sees) hidden patterns in the universe. Taking things from Point A and delivering them to Point B is merely their way of imposing the universal order they perceive. (In this case, the self-control roll is the alien’s willingness to forestall returning that item to its rightful place.)

A racial Kleptomaniac may be considered by the species as righteous, necessary, or merely inconvenient. This may or may not affect the value (depending on how much the GM views the point value of Kleptomaniac is tied to the social penalties for stealing). However, depending on what the racial Kleptomaniac compels the thief to do with the purloined items, it may still be a really inconvenient disadvantage!

LECHEROUSNESS

see p. B142

The underlying justification of Lecherousness is assumed to be rooted in lust. However, there's nothing in the description that relies on that origin to make the disadvantage work. All that's needed is an overwhelming urge to unite with others.

Thus, for example, perhaps a race with Lecherousness merely feels a compulsion to form connections with others. A techno-organic race might view those unions as broadening the web of interconnections, like a computer router reaching out to every network it can establish a handshake with.

RELATIONSHIP DISADVANTAGES

Many disadvantages (such as No Sense of Humor and Oblivious) center around the character's inability to sense certain aspects of interpersonal relationships. However, it's entirely possible that an alien species can – in fact – detect humor/motivations/etc., but chooses not to reveal or act upon that knowledge.

For example, a race might view humor as being intensely personal; such people would no more acknowledge jocular behavior than humans would compare private body parts with a complete stranger at a fast-food restaurant.

This doesn't affect the game mechanics of these disadvantages, but it *does* prevent a frustrated alien from blurting out the fact that he *does* comprehend allusions or jokes, but has been choosing not to acknowledge it.

LONER

see p. B142

As written, the Loner disadvantage merely compels the person to want to avoid contact with others. There's a great deal of leeway as to *why* the Loner wants to be alone.

Perhaps the sensory abilities of the species require a fair amount of time to process and assimilate information. If so, they need alone time because seeing outside sapients interferes with the memories they store (similar to how opening a dark-room door affects a developing picture).

LOW SELF-IMAGE

see p. B143

The Low Self-Image disadvantage has as its activation hook a belief that the odds are unfavorable. It does *not* require the sufferer to actually feel bad about himself or his abilities! At its

core, Low Self-Image is a self-fulfilling prophecy; as a racial disadvantage, it could represent any species with an augmented view of success/failure probabilities. Thus, for example, the species may be time-sensitive/precognitive/psychic; its members sense when they are most likely to fail.

NON-ICONOGRAPHIC

see p. B146

Coupled with limited disadvantages (p. 4), a species might be Non-Iconographic in certain situations. For example, a race might not be able to process any images or symbols above a certain size, or with a certain property (say, the color red). In fact, the species may not be able to *perceive* images in that situation . . . leading to interesting situations where the alien literally can't see a sign that's in front of its face.

ON THE EDGE

see p. B146

An absence of a self-preservation instinct is the only "qualifying" aspect of On the Edge; the reason *why* the person lacks a self-preservation instinct is open to interpretation. Alien species could have all kinds of advantages that mitigate the downsides of dying. In fact, depending on the traits possessed, the alien species may not even fully comprehend the *concept* of dying . . . at least, not in the same way that humanity does:

"Why did you do that! Are you trying to get yourself *killed*?"

" . . . I am not sure I understand the question."

OVERCONFIDENCE

see p. B148

From a game standpoint, overconfidence relies on the person getting into sticky situations that may or may not be too much to handle. It doesn't depend on the overconfident individual actually believing he will prevail!

This leaves some wiggle room for alien interpretations. For example, a species might view itself as being catalogers of reality; all situations with at least a slight possibility of success should be encountered and assessed. Such an "Overconfident" alien may not actually *believe* he will succeed, but he will believe that he *could* succeed . . . and thus feels compelled to give it a try. It would probably be disconcerting to encounter an extraterrestrial who charges forward "overconfidently," while it mutters about its inability to accomplish a goal.

PHOBIAS

see p. B148

For a truly alien outlook, consider that a phobia need not be something that can actually be expressed in a way that makes sense to a human. For game balance, all that's required is a rough appreciation of how likely the situation – which is otherwise undefined and indefinable – is to arise. (Compare with the existing phobias on pp. B149-150 to find one that feels roughly as limiting.)

For example, an alien species has a concept of *flerhan*. Humans can't perceive it, but it's a rare aura of foreboding; it can be found anywhere, but it's slightly more common at dusk, in enclosed places, and in the presence of an acquaintance whose name you're unsure of. The GM decides this is roughly as limiting as triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13). At certain points, the alien will say, "This room with the three posters and a plant feels too *flerhan*" or "The lone piece of toast next to two eggs is a *flerhan* situation," and then react accordingly with fear.

We can't let you go. You're dangerous to us. Don't fight; it's no use.

– Jack Belicec,
in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

PYROMANIA

see p. B150

The core game consideration of the Pyromania disadvantage is the need to set fires. An alien species could have all kinds of . . . alien outlooks as to why that is desirable. Maybe they view fire as a fundamental force of the universe that deserves to be set free. Maybe they fear a hell-like afterlife, and by unleashing fire in this realm, less fire is available to torment the hereafter.

SHORT ATTENTION SPAN

see p. B153

Many of the possibilities for Absent-Mindedness (p. 4) apply to Short Attention Span. All that's required is that the alien be distracted from tasks after a few minutes.

For example, maybe the alien species exists in a cross-dimensional form. Every few minutes he swaps back and forth between alternate dimensions that are progressing almost – but not *quite* – identically to the "real" timeline. This makes it difficult to maintain any task beyond a few minutes. In this reality, the alien is defusing the bomb and has all the yellow wires cut, with the blue wires remaining; suddenly, the alien shifts realities, so it seems the white wires are cut and the red ones seem to be left. Or is it the blue ones? Where was he, again?

SHYNESS

see p. B154

The Shyness disadvantage is similar to Loner (p. 8), and can be approached similarly. As that disadvantage, the reason *why* the alien avoids contact with strangers is open to interpretation. For example, maybe the species senses (or believes it can sense) the general lifespan of all sapient; this sense doesn't yield any

specific or useful information, but it does mean that whenever a member of the race is around others, he hears a constant whispering, "SOONsoonsoonsoonDIEDiediediedie . . ." This makes using any of the affected skills more difficult (it's hard to use Savoir-Faire on someone about whom you keep hearing odd tormenting whispers).

UNLUCKINESS

see p. B160

The game effects of Unluckiness merely note that something will go wrong for the afflicted. The outlook on this can be alien. For example, the race may be sensitive to probabilities, and it views its collective Unluckiness as drawing out the misfortune of the universe, like a racial lightning rod. In this case, they may well look down on other species: "We're cleaning the cosmos; what are *you* doing?!"

Unluckiness can also be linked with other disadvantages. As one example, maybe the Unluckiness is tied to Pyromania, such that every time the alien suffers an unfortunate setback he feels a compulsion to restore balance by unleashing fire (fighting the chaos of fortune with the chaos of fire).

THE END, THE BEGINNING

By looking closely at each disadvantage and thinking of how to make it "different" but the same, you can come up with strange and wonderful alien encounters. Plus, since you're starting at the game effects and working backward, these entities will be perfectly balanced with the existing **Basic Set** rules. The universe awaits . . . and it's stranger than you thought possible!

Point Break

If using limitations on disadvantages (p. 4), be careful to make sure that the resultant disadvantage is roughly of a similar level of inconvenience. (As an extreme example, "Has Berserk every other decade" is *not* worth a -20% limitation, even though it's limiting "half the time"!)

As a simple procedure, eyeball the final point cost of a limited disadvantage against similarly priced disadvantages; a -5-point disadvantage should be roughly as limiting as Hidebound, a -15-point disadvantage should be as affecting as Kleptomania, a -25-point disadvantage should hamper an entity as often as Mute, etc. Tweak the percentage of the limitation as needed, or simply handwave a correct point cost into being and call it a new name (see the advice on pp. B165-166 for more insight).

Also, remember the advice in this article is primarily intended for the GM designing alien species, where point values aren't as fervently controlled. Consult your local galactic authorities before using this technique for PCs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE TROJAN GAMBIT

BY MICHELE ARMELLINI

Something has attached itself to him.

– Captain Dallas, in *Alien*

The intelligent, mind-controlling parasite is a classic science-fiction trope. Stereotypically, such entities always seem to want to be hosted by humans. However, good ideas stem from mixing up the familiar. The entities described here – the People – seem unable to affect us. Instead, they have chosen as hosts a powerful, peaceful species humanity knows and considers an ally. The People seem willing to exploit that species – even sacrifice it – to attack those of Earth.

This parasite is a sneaky way to alienate an already known civilization, adding a fresh twist to situations where the GM cannot easily introduce a new space empire. What follows is one broad example of how the threat can be added to the campaign, leaving the doors open for a sinister situation setup. The factions involved have been given generic names; these can be altered to something more appropriate and flavorful. In particular, the Spacefarers should be an established allied alien race within the campaign. The heroes' civilization is assumed to be human solely as a labeling convenience.

In All Realms Fantastic

These body snatchers do not need to be limited to a spacefaring setting. In a fantasy setting, they could take control of those cute, peace-loving elves, too.

ONCE UPON A TIME

The People lived in the ocean. They fed like lampreys, attaching their mouth to an animal and consuming its blood without killing it. They were external parasites.

Their preferred targets were marine mammals, the Beasts. When these began the evolutionary process that brought them onto dry land, the People went along. The Beasts developed intelligence and prehensile limbs, both of which helped them in getting rid of the blood-sucking parasites – almost. This, indeed, sparked the People's evolution, too. They became *more* intelligent and acquired ways to control their hosts. Over the millennia, this relationship became something of a symbiosis; even if the People dominated the Beasts, they needed them . . . as well-trained animals. The Beasts

built cities, for the People's convenience, each of them carrying one of the People on his back.

Disaster, Nearly

Just as the People had begun exploring space, disaster struck their homeworld in the form of a freak flare from their sun. Most of the life forms that were caught in the open soon died from radiation. Forests burned, and one of the icecaps melted, swamping coastal areas, destabilizing the weather patterns, and causing further massive losses. The People's civilization waned to a flickering candle as the depleted pool of Beasts was hit by epidemics. Large swaths of land were no longer inhabitable. The People weren't even sure that their planet would remain viable.

To the Stars

Fortuitously, the friendly Spacefarers appeared. They were led to believe that the Beasts were the intelligent beings, each hosting a non-sapient symbiont. The People saw them as their ticket out of their wrecked planet. They waited until the Spacefarers established a fairly regular traffic, naively providing relief to the endangered civilization. Then, the People took control of the crews of several starships.

Things proved more difficult than expected. The biochemistry was different. Several of the Spacefarers and some of the People had lethal allergic reactions. Only the most adaptable of the People managed to master the alien thought processes, and the strongest-willed of the Spacefarers were impervious to mind control (necessitating the hosts' death). In addition, the Spacefarers' blood did not provide all the nutrients the People needed, and People who dominate Spacefarers had to make their servants eat chemicals that were vital to their masters but long-term poisons to the Spacefarers themselves.

Eventually, the People managed to take control of one of the Spacefarers' planets, named Saldeh. However, it was a small, underpopulated outpost, a colony of a huge empire. It was also the beginning of the quest for galactic dominance.

Now

The People are still struggling to keep their home planet alive, and they want to live on the backs of their comfortable Beasts, not on those unhealthy Spacefarers. They are ruthlessly exploiting the resources of the Spacefarers' colony to this end, but those are limited.

There are too many Spacefarers and not enough People to take control of the whole empire. Additionally, since some of the Spacefarers can resist control, attempting that could prove deadly to too many symbiotes. The People likewise aren't trying to take command of other starships arriving on Saldeh; one botched attempt or one ship running away, and the plan would be revealed.

However, many ships were in orbit when the People took control of Saldeh. The People decided that while they would not stand a chance against the Spacefarers, they might use those ships to gather further resources to mend their home, or to take over other inhabitable planets. They set out to find suitable targets.

And they found humanity.

*Let's hope we don't
catch it. I'd hate to
wake up some morning
and find out that you
weren't you.*

*– Dr. Miles Bennell,
in **Invasion
of the Body
Snatchers***

RECENT EVENTS

Humanity didn't notice, but the People's campaign to take over whatever they can has begun. Initially, the first events are likely to remain under the radar, unless the heroes work in the right field (intelligence agencies, the exploration service, etc.). As events progress, skills such as Research, Current Affairs, and Intelligence Analysis may come into play to assess those events, and Contacts can be valuable.

Missing Ships

Several ships have disappeared. Statistical analysis (using Research and Mathematics, with bonuses) shows this is a spike over the average. A Navigation success hints that the disappearances seem clustered in an area where the Spacefarers are active.

The People used the Saldeh ships to lure new human subjects into traps. Tests on the prisoners have shown they are unsuitable as hosts. (The reason is up to the GM; perhaps the

thought processes are too alien, or perhaps there is some fundamental biochemical difference.) So the People decided they would not subjugate humans; instead, they would grab resources while feigning they are Spacefarers.

Some of the crews of those ships are still alive in a lab on Saldeh, perhaps including a friend or Dependent of the adventurers.

The KR209 Mystery

The private mining space station *KR209* was suddenly deserted by its personnel. Valuable ore was removed, as were its data banks. The owning company suspects a large-scale theft by a competitor. However, an accurate investigation – using Forensics and Biology to discover physical clues, and Electronics Operation (Surveillance) to analyze the station's logs – reveals that some Spacefarers have been there. Biological traces of another, unknown species can be found. Market Analysis or Merchant rolls can ascertain that the stolen goods haven't resurfaced.

This raid was for the ore, but also for additional test subjects and for intelligence. The station's computers will let the People know everything about humanity, given time.

The Asteroids Scam

An important Spacefarer planetary government bought invaluable rights over several asteroids from their owners (members of the heroes' civilization). Then they stopped paying. Now, the buyer denies any involvement . . . and the asteroids have been moved! The buyer's representatives who signed the deal have disappeared, too. (Investigation will reveal they all had been on Saldeh for some time.)

The People are exploiting us, leaving the blame with the Spacefarers.

The Lilia Accident

A "border incident" is an uncommon occurrence nowadays, and it's unconceivable for the Spacefarers – which is why the *Lilia* accident made headlines everywhere. Yet their commanders' account is that the human warship *Lilia* opened fire first, and the Spacefarers destroyed it in self-defense. (The Spacefarer ships involved are from Saldeh.) The Spacefarers' empire supports them, and since humanity knows how peaceful they are, public opinion tends to believe the *Lilia* is to blame.

An investigation of the battle area retrieves a hulk of a Spacefarer light ship, complete with bodies. However, no fragments of the *Lilia* can be found.

Indeed, the *Lilia* was captured and is now a valuable addition to the People's firepower. The Spacefarers of Saldeh (that is, the People) are asking for reparations, too.

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

After the *Lilia* incident, human civilization is wary when dealing with the Spacefarers, even though they are still admired and liked. As the situation escalates, the heroes' agency or Patron becomes involved.

The Spacefarers have no inkling of what is going on. Meanwhile, the People have set their sights on their next prize. Maybe this time it's an entire planet.

IN THE CAMPAIGN

The Spacefarers' empire is vague enough that it should fit any benign interstellar entity already known. As designed, the Spacefarers should normally use clothing – so that the parasites can hide. The People's biochemical form of Mind Control does not rely on psionic methods.

This scheme works best if travel and communications aren't frictionless. Ideally, there shouldn't be FTL communication, travel should take some time, and cultural diversity shouldn't be without problems. Delays and difficulties will help the parasites. If this is not the case, the GM should consider making them more powerful.

Once a parasite has gained control of a host, the next chance for the latter to break free (without outside intervention) is when he's ordered to do something against his principles (see p. B68).

ALIENATION

While the situation allows for combat, this threat works best in campaigns that focus on social encounters. The alienation of a species the adventurers (and players!) know and like is a key element here, and this is emphasized by personal interaction with parasitized Spacefarers.

In such an encounter, the heroes can notice small clues (especially using Body Language and Detect Lies). The Spacefarers they deal with seem insincere; they look duller and slower than those they have met before. They also eat a tremendous amount! The investigators might put that down to personality or circumstances, but eventually, they'll have to admit that either they didn't know the Spacefarers all that well, or these guys aren't normal.

To up the ante, the adventurers may also meet a Spacefarer they already know personally . . . and he has changed a *lot*.

CLASSIC TREATMENT

While this take on the mind-controlling parasites is intended to be a variation on the stereotypical trope (since they cannot control humanity), the classic approach can be revisited. In this case, simply decide that they can indeed take control of the race of man. This makes for that special paranoia within the gaming group: "Undress! Now! Turn around!"

FIGHTING ALONE

A typical scenario for these situations is the authorities disbelieving the initial reports. If the heroes are too accustomed to being backed up by their agency's authority, this is a good time to leave them out to dry. Coupled with the option that enables the parasites to control humanity, the PCs will also be wary of their own superiors; what if they have been taken over already?

INTERACTING WITH THE SPACEFARERS

The Spacefarers close ranks. Allegations that Saldeh is becoming a rogue planet will initially fall on deaf ears. It will take a lot of diplomacy just to convince them, and then to come up with a common plan. Some decision-makers within human civilization might support "definitive" action, but the Spacefarers will want to save their brethren on Saldeh.

TURNING THE TABLES

For a mind-spinning change, the heroes can be People. This is probably more suitable for a one-shot adventure, but it might be curious and challenging to roleplay such an entity. This situation can provide an utter outsider's view of a long-standing campaign.

NIGHTMARE PLANETS

The People's original planet and Saldeh make for fearsome places to visit. The former is already bad enough as a disaster planet, and only parasites and host animals are slowly dying there. The latter seems to be a Spacefarers' colony, but that's deceptive. Somewhere, there is that lab. Maybe there still are free Spacefarers in the highlands, a guerrilla movement.

As an adventure possibility, the heroes are on one of these two worlds and have discovered the horrible truth. Now they have to flee and report. Alternatively, the PCs may be visiting Saldeh as commandos, intent on freeing the test subjects. The People will object.

You're so good at stretching the truth into a sugarcoated lie

Everyone takes a bite

I have been dining with the enemy

It was a wolf in sheep's clothing, now it's so clear to me.

– This Providence, A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Teal'c: The Goa'uld visit here regularly. It is one of their favorite places to harvest hosts for Goa'uld absorption.

Dr. Daniel Jackson: You know, I wish you wouldn't say "harvest." We're talking about human beings, not . . . Brussel sprouts.

– *Stargate SG-1 #1.15*

THE PARASITES AND HOSTS

The first species that the parasites used as hosts has not evolved into a sapient one. They are similar to well-trained animals. Intelligent beings that get parasitized acquire a package of additional traits.

THE PEOPLE

89 points

They look like flat fish, with both eyes on one side and a teeth-rich, funnel-shaped mouth on the other. Their skin is covered with gray, oily scales. The average weight of a ST 8 parasite is 16 lbs., and each point of ST above or below 8 implies a 2-lb. increase or decrease. They are never longer than 18" or shorter than 11" (SM -4).

Their parasitism led them to make do without what most expect from a sapient species, such as manipulators, good locomotion, or communication means. For all of that, they make use of hosts. Therefore, they have no limbs; they can swim, and on land, they move awkwardly, like a slow seal. The parasites can rest without actually sleeping. They can't talk to each other, save through their "servants." If left to their own devices, the best they can do is to look for a new host, preferably in a warm aquatic or wet environment. They can easily smell an animal and seek its heat.

What they are good at is taking control of such a warm body. They have a highly refined biochemistry, allowing them to inject several compounds in the victims' bloodstream: a local anesthetic so that the hosts won't easily realize they've been bitten, and substances that will make it harder for them to fight back, physically and mentally. The parasites then inject filament probes that connect with the victims' central nervous system, and through it, with their brains. Sometimes the subjects resist, especially if they are strong willed; if they fail, they become servants. It is a rare occurrence that a host can break free. The parasites will normally attack while the potential hosts are sleeping.

The parasites are good at sticking to their servants' bodies, preferably on their backs, thanks to small suckers, and heal quickly while they can feed.

The hosts don't entirely lose their personality, and they are aware they are being ordered around. However, since they acquire a Slave Mentality, they are content to do so. If they break free, they will be confused for a while, and they won't remember anything.

Predictably, these body snatchers look down on anyone else; to them, they are all cattle, whose freedom or beliefs count for nothing. Should the existence of this species become known to other civilizations, they'd surely qualify for a bad Reputation.

The parasites' society is more cohesive than many others, but they aren't a hive mind. Leaders, followers, and dissenters exist. However, while disagreements may arise as to how to exploit their servants, those among them that fancy making do without hosts are considered dangerous lunatics. The most enlightened – a tiny minority – just argue that only nonsapient animals should be servants.

Further details, such as their reproductive methods, are left to the GM. (However, their *rate* of reproduction should be limited enough that the People are considered a rare resource; the body snatchers need to rely on subterfuge rather than simply breeding their way to galactic domination.)

Attribute Modifiers: ST-2 [-20]; IQ+1 [20]; HT+2 [20].

Secondary Characteristic Modifiers: SM -4.

Advantages: Acute Taste and Smell 3 [6]; Affliction 2 (HT-1; Blood Agent, -40%; Daze, +50%; Follow-Up, Teeth, +0%; Low Signature, +10%) [24]; Clinging (Living skin, -40%) [12]; Doesn't Breathe (Oxygen Absorption, -25%) [15]; Doesn't Sleep [20]; Infravision [10]; Mind Control (Accessibility, Only on parasitized subject, -30%; No Memory, +10%; Puppet, -40%) [20]; Mind Probe (Accessibility, Only on parasitized subject, -30%) [14]; Piercing Striker (Tail; Weak, -50%) [3]; Slippery 2 [4]; Teeth (Sharp) [1]; Very Rapid Healing (Accessibility, Only while parasitizing, -30%) [11].

Disadvantages: Callous [-5]; Cannot Speak (Mitigator: Host, -60%) [-10]; Cold-Blooded [-5]; Intolerance (Other species) [-10]; No Legs (Semi-Aquatic) [0]; No Manipulators (Mitigator: Host, -60%) [-20]; Restricted Diet (Blood from compatible hosts) [-20].

Quirks: Loves wet, warm environments [-1].

*We are about to transship. I feel exhilarated.
Puppet masters – the free men are coming to kill
you! Death and Destruction!*
– Robert A. Heinlein, *The Puppet Masters*

New Meta-Trait: Generic Host

-70 points

Individuals who carry a parasite lose 1 HP per day due to blood loss. This is increased by 1 if on that day their master made use of his Very Rapid Healing, and each additional parasite after the first one multiplies the HP loss by 2. The host can regain the HP normally (see p. B424, which means that if he works, he'll need daily medical care), provided that he eats much more than what is usual. If he fails to do that, he can't regain the lost HPs.

While the host keeps his basic personality traits, there are a few minor changes, resulting in a general "dulling out." These are represented by quirks and quirk-level versions of some mental disadvantages.

The package includes Acute Taste and Smell 1 [2]; Increased Consumption 1 [-10]; Dull [-1]; Fearlessness 1 [2]; Prone to Dozing [-1]; Reduced Sex Drive [-1]; Reprogrammable [-10]; Slave Mentality [-40]; Slow Riser [-5]; Somewhat Clueless [-1]; and Wounded [-5].

The above is the standard condition for a host, but some species may have additional problems. If the victim is a Spacefarer, he also acquires Terminally Ill [-75].

The GM should take care to temporarily ignore traits that conflict with the above. For instance, parasitized characters are likely to lose Curious, Impulsiveness, Insomniac, Intuition, Lecherousness, or Rapier Wit. It would be reasonable to degrade the fitness level (Very Fit becomes just Fit, etc.).

If the GM so wishes, the hosts could also become less aggressive. This would result in the temporary loss of other mental Disadvantages, such as Bad Temper or Bloodlust, or in an increased chance of success in self-control rolls.

Optionally, the GM could consider further health implications. These parasites inject substances that guarantee an easy blood flow – which would be a life-threatening condition for a victim suffering from Hemophilia.

Beast

This is the standard host of the People on their planet of origin. It looks like a small centauroid hippopotamus with too many legs (six) and two short arms. Males are up to 9' long.

When parasitized, they have the Generic Host meta-trait (above). They will not lose Slave Mentality if freed, having existed under control for generations.

ST: 30	HP: 28	Speed: 6.00
DX: 10	Will: 7	Move: 7
IQ: 5	Per: 10	Weight: 3,200 lbs.
HT: 12	FP: 12	SM: +2
Dodge: 9	Parry: N/A	DR: 2

Traits: Extra Legs (Six Legs); Hidebound; Incurious; Short Arms; Slave Mentality; Unfit.

Skills: Mount-10.

Recommended Reading

Heinlein, Robert A. *The Puppet Masters* (Doubleday, 1951). These parasites really resemble the People.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956). The best example of this subgenre.

Meyer, Stephenie. *The Host* (Little, Brown & Co., 2008). When the host's personality doesn't give up.

Puppet Masters, The (Stuart Orme, 1994). The movie.

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (Nicholas Meyer, 1982). The parasite isn't the focus, but it's unpleasant enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini lives in Udine, Italy, with his very understanding wife Silvia. He met Heinlein's slugs long ago, but only as a young avid science-fiction reader, and no, he's not mind-controlled. He makes a living out of foreign languages, but he loves dabbling with and studying the obscure and the uncanny – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! Apart from works he published in Italian, he has written for *Pyramid*, and he is the author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legions**. He is also the author or co-author (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several **GURPS** supplements available at e23.sjgames.com: **GURPS WWII: Their Finest Hour**, **GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle**, and **GURPS WWII: Michael's Army**.

MAKING SOMETHING ALIEN

BY ALAN LEDDON

The word “alien” conjures up images of distant worlds, strange diets, untranslatable languages. . . well, no, it doesn’t. Thanks to *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Babylon 5*, and other media offerings, extraterrestrials seem no different than people from our world. Extraterrestrials typically follow a human-like body plan and want the same things (fun, love, power, sex, and wealth) that humans want. This stretches believability.

To make an “extraterrestrial” truly *alien* to a gaming group, you must remove the familiarity from it. Consider the spider with eight legs, six or eight unblinking eyes, and its habit of envenoming prey. They are familiar enough to a Westerner, but get in there and look at one. How many knees does it have? Other eight-legged creatures can serve as examples too – crabs, octopi, and squid are as different from humanity as living creatures can be. They are *unfamiliar*.

What feelings do you have coming face to face with something so different? Many people feel a twinge of loathing or dread when looking upon these things. That feeling is the experience of encountering something alien – and it is what your characters (and, hopefully, players) should feel when meeting an alien. H.P. Lovecraft recognized this when he designed Cthulhu.

Making an entity truly *alien* is difficult. “Alien behavior,” “alien motives” and “alien thoughts” almost by definition are things not easily imagined. For the most part, it is challenging to make aliens seem to be outside the bounds of the familiar.

WHAT HAS BEEN TRIED?

Gamers are familiar with a variety of alien races from movies, television, books, and comics. Most fail to be “truly” alien because they retain familiarity – in general, they are humans in costumes that don’t disguise their “human-ness,” who behave very much like modern Americans (or 20th-century samurai, or whatever).

Without restating the discussion on this topic in *GURPS Space* (p. 135), the usual methods for making ETs less familiar include making them look less human, making them behave oddly, giving them exaggerated personality traits, and trying to obscure their motives. The “Grey” of modern pop culture exemplifies all four techniques:

- Greys are smaller than humans, with large eyes and odd body proportions.

- Greys typically are naked in the presence of strangers, and think nothing of abducting people and performing bizarre activities upon them.

- Greys are seen as callous, drilling and cutting people over protestations and without anesthetics.

- Greys never discuss their reasons, what (if any) data they collect, or why their victims were chosen. Some victims claim that the Greys employ communication that humans are unable to tap into (telepathy).

So, we have odd-looking fellows who act in a manner not permitted in familiar societies, who don’t exhibit normal emotions, and, creepiest of all, cannot be communicated with in familiar ways. Even the human tendency to be helpful and forthcoming is absent from Greys, as they do not speak of their work or correct medical problems like cavities and AIDS for their test subjects. These levels of unfamiliarity make the Grey an uncomfortable presence at best – alien.

*Flashes of rounded symmetry
dance in a clear blue sky, announcing
the demons’ forms in the geomancy
of doom. Our doom. The doom of
the human family.*

– Nigel Kerner,
Song of the Greys

ALIEN THOUGHTS

Thoughts are arguably the most human of traits. Our thoughts are our only real privacy, and our truest intimacy. They are *familiar*. So how do we model someone who thinks differently?

Humans have a binary logic – on/off, right/wrong, guilty/not guilty. It is only with some effort and education (or the prodding of others) that people can see the intermediate values (“shades of gray” such as on/standby/off or guilty/not guilty due to insanity/not guilty). Perhaps some aliens have more than two values in their logic?

It would seem likely that an alien race with three eyes, three arms, and three legs will have a three-valued logic system. Likewise, an alien who is largely a spider might have an eight-valued logic, or at least bury multiple shades of gray into a simpler logic system. This requires forethought by the GM; what are the six steps between “the machine is on and operating normally” and “the machine is off”? It might be easier to show this to characters (and players) in play: “Humans! Yes/no! Yes/no! Do you ever understand anything? What is the Humanese word for *glpu*?” Fortunately for the GM, the alien character should have as much trouble relating this value to the PCs as the GM does figuring out what the alien is trying to convey.

Even worse, what if the alien values some logical values over others? In games, this is best coupled with an alien whose limbs are unequal – two with fine manipulators, and two tentacles, or perhaps resembling the claws of a male fiddler crab (one tiny and one enormous). Such an alien might see (for example) “no,” “zero,” and “off” as being of greater value than their opposites; perhaps one “no” is equal to two “yes”?

ALIEN MOTIVATIONS

The easiest way to understand what might motivate an alien life form is to understand what motivates terrestrial ones and contrast these to possible alien motivations. All higher animals on Earth seek to avoid pain and injury, to eat, and to reproduce; most also take an interest in caring for their young. Humans seek comfort in various forms, usually from observance of customs, displays of wealth, and power. Note that not all humans view these things in the same way – a yurt is as comfortable to a Mongolian desert dweller as an igloo is to an Inuit!

Customs are an easy concept to introduce to a fictional alien race. On Earth, customs, mores, and etiquette vary from one region of the globe to another; the differences from one planet to another might make real understanding impossible. *GURPS Japan* describes this phenomenon (see *Westerner's Reaction to Japanese*, pp. 32-33, and *Japan and the West*, p. 46). In some times and places on Earth, gift giving was a matter of survival; perhaps your aliens see offering a gift as an insult: “You cannot afford to support your family, so I wish to offer you this to help you!” Earthly Westerners shake hands to show that no weapon has been readied, but the Warrior caste Mimbari of *Babylon 5* considered it an insult to meet someone new without displaying one’s weapons.

From a biological standpoint, it makes no sense for an organism to not be motivated to preserve its own life and comfort *until it passes its child-bearing years*. The whole purpose of being able to produce young is to propagate the species; there is no biological point in living if the individual creatures don’t at least live long enough to reproduce. Humans are familiar with people being able to bear children and with living and taking care of one’s own needs well past child-bearing age. Humans would find it alien to become suicidal or no longer able to live after mating or after raising one’s children (both could occur in a single species – maybe females die during childbirth, and males die after raising the progeny). Further, a race that takes little to no interest in its newborns – such as the Hivers (see *GURPS Traveller: Alien Races 3*) – would create some unpleasant emotions in humans.

What about physical comfort? Humans find physical comfort in different climates, with different types of clothing, and on different kinds of furniture. What would an alien find comfortable? Science-fiction writers have offered aliens that:

- Wallow in their own excrement (the Utods of *The Dark Light Years* by Brian Aldiss).
- Seek pain as a religious expression (the Yuuzhan Vong of the Star Wars universe).
- Dwell within alien hosts (the Goa’uld of *Stargate*).
- Live in extreme temperatures (the Tholians of the original *Star Trek* series).

Certainly, a GM can come up with more odd ways to be comfortable. Perhaps a large alien prefers to have humans or other aliens sit on her? Do members of the race sleep upside down like terrestrial bats?

Comfort can be derived by ritualized practice and customs. Personal space is comes from cultural norms; others standing too close makes many people uncomfortable, and the required personal space varies by culture and relationship. Perhaps the alien race prefers to converse during a drawn-out embrace; even their trials, legislative proceedings, and educational system are built around massive group hugs. Perhaps the aliens have a small, seemingly minor ritual that must be performed at a certain time or before a certain act – and interrupting it requires a strong reaction. How offensive is shaking hands or bowing going to be to them?

It is likely that aliens and humans won’t like the same foods. *Alien Nation* got this pretty close to right, with the Newcomers liking mustard in their coffee and pancreas at fast-food restaurants. Meanwhile, the *Star Trek* idea of friends from several planets blithely sharing a breakfast of Klingon coffee, Denebian eggs, and Rigellian apples is unrealistic. It is unlikely that foods palatable to entities from one planet would be edible to those from another; at the very least, the taste of alien food would be disgusting to most people.

Some SETI astronomers with generally optimistic views about contact have recognized that we cannot assume alien motivations. As Shostak noted, audiences can readily identify with alien impulses that are, in fact, merely transposed human impulses. Yet, we can no better guess their motivations than goldfish can infer ours.

– Michael A.G. Michaud, *Contact With Alien Civilizations*

Worse, proteins that are nutritive to denizens of one world may be deadly venoms to those of another. Amino acids and vitamins that do not exist on the consumer's home world may result in vomiting, diarrhea, or even organ failure when consumed. For even more foreign beings, perhaps the diet of the alien race is really unfamiliar – they can subsist for a time on clays and other soft minerals, or they eat nutrient-rich soils, or the excrement of their version of livestock. It is all natural, of course . . . but how would humans react to them? In *The Dark Light Years* by Brian Aldiss, humans mistreated the Utods because they dwell in their own waste.

What about less biological motivations? Humans seek entertainment, power, and wealth.

The search for power can be argued to be biological in nature. Many animals – including humans, chimpanzees, and dogs – seek to establish dominance over others. What if an alien race was unable to comprehend the idea of “inequality” or “dominance”? Their society is completely egalitarian, and power structures are incomprehensible to them. Without a clear leader, they rely on group consensus for all important decisions, a process that is maddeningly slow to PCs faced with a time limit of some sort.

Wealth doesn't have to mean money. Some terrestrial cultures have measured wealth in horses, land, or property (including wives, slaves, or weapons). What would an alien measure wealth in? Perhaps a truthful alien race might exchange goods for exciting adventure stories – the hero with the most exciting stories has the best house, most desirable mate, highest credit rating, and largest yard. To money-hungry humans, this system would seem both insane and easy to take advantage of.

The list of things entertaining to humans has run a long gamut. Certain modern folks love to sit around campfires and sing songs about unity, while the Scythians of 2,000 years ago were said (by Herodotus) to have watched their children fight dogs in large pits. What might entertain your aliens? Watching moss grow is boring to adventurers . . . but it could be pleasurable to their new alien acquaintances.

ALIEN LOOKS

The appearance of an alien is dictated in large part by the climate that its species evolved in. Consider the sophont primates from Terra, which developed on a largely flat grassland under an unforgiving hot sun. These primates walk upright to give them better distance vision over the plain, and are largely hairless to help them shed heat. Hair on top of their heads protects against excess absorption of solar radiation.

Fictional aliens should show hallmarks of their native climate. For example, consider a race evolving on the moon of a gas giant. The combination of solar heat, heat from the gas giant, and geologic heat from the moon warm the satellite enough to allow liquid water to exist on it. Now consider the day and night patterns. Arbitrarily setting the moon's rotation at 24 hours and its orbit of its parent at 144 hours (six days), the inhabitants of this world experience an average of 12 hours of dim, cool day under the solar light, then an average of 12 hours of warmer night, lit by light reflected by the gas giant. This cycle happens three times, then is replaced by winter – an average of 12 hours of starless, warm night (facing the gas giant) followed by an average of 12 hours of cold, starry night. This cycle also

repeats three times. . . then is replaced by the first cycle. How does this affect their appearance?

The residents spend much of their time in darkness or dim light. Their eyes will be larger than those of humans, and they may have more eyes – perhaps six or eight. A Nictitating Membrane (p. B71) may be present to protect the eyes from the moon's brief daylight. They rely on hearing more than humans, perhaps with wider spacing between their ears to better localize sounds. If they are preyed upon, they may be colored for camouflage in the dark; perhaps red or a color matching local vegetation. They may also have a thick layer of fat under their skin to help them retain heat. If the parent planet puts out significant heat, the aliens have long ears, fingers, and toes to radiate body heat during the times when the moon faces the giant. Those long appendages all have dense networks of circulatory-fluid vessels to help them radiate energy in hot periods and prevent frostbite in cold periods. Everything discussed in *GURPS Space* (pp. 134-170) should also be considered.

Adventure Seeds

First Contact: In a modern or near future game, the heroes are the first to encounter an alien species. The alien is repulsed by the heroes' appearances, wary of their customs, and unable to speak their language. It may need help, or may simply be collecting specimens for its alma mater.

First Contact, Take 2: A vessel has crashed near the adventurers' base. They are the first to arrive. If there are multiple species in the game, this one is heretofore unknown. The alien attempts communication by drawing figures in the dirt or sand with one claw . . . scratch marks equal in number to the number of claws it has, and symbols to represent mathematical concepts. Future interactions with this race will depend on how this traveler is treated by the PCs and their neighbors.

FINAL (HUMAN) THOUGHTS

The effort put into creating a truly alien race will pay dividends in the satisfaction and interest of the players. Imagine their delight when an alien is not here to take women, water, or gold, but is motivated by something that is challenging to decipher – or unknowable. The players' interest will be stoked by an alien appearance that matches its origin, and by aliens that have unique motivations and customs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Leddon remains in Madison, WI, where he alternates being the GM and playing in two RPG groups. He preaches the superiority of the One True Game System to anyone who will listen. Alan's other interests include H.P. Lovecraft's writing, science, bears, and the SCA. When not indulging these interests, Alan spends an excessive amount of time working as a telephone operator, some time working as a nurse, and a vast amount of time answering the questions of his daughter, six-year-old Raven. Raven has learned to play *Car Wars*, and she has also played characters in two roleplaying campaigns.

EIDETIC MEMORY

WARGRAVE STATION

BY DAVID L. PULVER

Long-dead alien races offer two advantages over first contact with live ones: The adventurers get to play space archaeologist, and the GM doesn't have to work out every detail of an alien culture, instead doling out cryptic clues from the mysterious artifacts they left behind. What sort of artifact? Well, this campaign setting came about when I realized I had far more starship deck plans lying around than I knew what to do with . . .

Tee Gar Soom: Collecting space junk? Oh, c'mon, Commander! The Academy isn't here to teach us garbage collecting.

Cmdr. Isaac Gampu: On the contrary. The Academy is here to teach us everything. The Academy is all things to all people.

– *Space Academy* #1.4

PIRATES, SUITS, AND ALIENS

The Helix Nebula: 2.5 light-years of fluorescent gas, an eye of god centered on a dying star slowly collapsing into a white dwarf. It had no planets, but lay astride a major trade route. Its first human visitors found far more than a picturesque planetary nebula. In close orbit was scattered a graveyard of shattered steel. Centuries ago, a battle had taken place between two

alien star fleets, leaving the drifting wrecks of countless warships, a floating junkyard. And something else: an alien space station in polar orbit above the fading sun. Empty of life, but not of mystery – Wargrave Station.

The station was discovered 12 years ago by space pirate Jacklyn Mahoney. Her organization salvaged several ships, and used the place as a pirate base. Eventually Macrotech Corporation, her main victim, tracked down “Jackal” Mahoney through the treachery of one of her lieutenants. Macrotech did not inform the Patrol; instead, it hired mercenaries to take out the pirates. Some were killed; others scattered into the ship's graveyard and hid among the floating wrecks. Macrotech seized control of Wargrave Station.

Corporate scientists were amazed at their prize. They estimated 6,000 wrecked alien ships orbited the dying star. Many were junk; others had salvageable working parts, or alien relics worth researching or reselling. A few were nearly intact, requiring only spare parts from other wrecks to be put back into working order. But the salvage wasn't easy. Although the aliens that crewed the battle fleets were dead, some of the vessels were not quiet. Alien war machines lived on: combat robots, automated ship defenses, and biomechanical horrors lurking within the wrecks. Dating of the alien battle was uncertain, but may have been a few centuries ago, a disturbing prospect as it indicated some of these unknown races are likely still around.

Macrotech didn't care. They saw Wargrave as a source of profit. They occupied it and began repairing the station, bringing in salvage crews to explore the alien wrecks, and scientists to study them. The scientists – at some cost in lives – have begun to unravel the mysteries. They believe there were several species in the battle: Archaeologists labeled the two sides the “Adversary” and the “Coalition.”

Many Coalition ships are largely intact, tombs for their alien crews. This is because the Adversaries sometimes killed their enemies with an intense radiation pulse weapon. This fried computers and electronics, but left much hardware undamaged. There are numerous species that made up the Coalition, but two examples were named the Biomacha and the Hydrans.

The Biomacha ships were crafted by a multiracial or caste species with advanced biotechnology. Their ships were almost living things, save for the computer-brains that controlled them.

Many are now corpses, but in some cases, life-support remains intact and a variety of nonsapient occupants survive: frightening semi-sentient jelly-like cubes and polymorphic creatures that seem to have been pets, security guards, or maintenance devices, for example. Other living things have also been found: nearly mindless but aggressive pseudo-organic “maggot-machines” (possibly of Adversary origin) animating the corpses of alien bodies. These may be robots whose programming was degraded by the radiation that killed the computers, but occasionally they lurch into deadly action.

The “Hydra” are even more dangerous. They seem to have resembled ambulatory jellyfish, native to a low-G world, who made extensive use of robotic or cyborg war machines as defenders and boarders. Many of these are still functioning, although dormant. Finding an almost intact Hydran wreck is a great prize – but also a great danger. More often than not, bits of wreckage and incidental intact cybernetic or robotic machines are found – and some of these machines are deadly. Many Hydran ships were equipped with highly exotic super-science weapons, probably TL10-11^.

Wrecked Adversary ships are few and far between – most are simple clouds of charred debris. Either the Coalition used more destructive weapons, or the Adversaries won the battle and salvaged those of their ships that were intact. Often a ring of wrecked Coalition vessels is found around the debris from a single Adversary craft, suggesting the Adversaries were more powerful. Little is known of them; rumors of a semi-intact Adversary vessel can spark a treasure hunt.

Finally, there are unique ships, termed “Auxiliaries.” Since the ships are usually small, TL10, and found with Hydran or Biomacha vessels, it’s been speculated that they are minor allies or mercenaries of the Coalition. Their vessels are often radically different in design. Some alien bodies have been found within them. In one case, a humanoid was discovered in suspended animation – but died while revival was attempted.

SALVAGE RUSH

As word of the wonders and horrors within the Wargrave system leaked out, Macrotech faced a flood of free-lance salvage crews competing with its own teams. An orderly operation turned into a gold rush, attracting humans and aliens to the system. Flocks of marginal spacefarers in this sector

diverted their attention from asteroid mining, trading, or smuggling to seek a quick buck. So did the con artists who prey upon them. Macrotech quickly realized it could not prohibit unlicensed salvage. But since it technically “owned” the system, their executives decided the next best thing was to license all teams, pay good fees for salvage, and allow Wargrave to be used as a base.

Not everyone is willing to share their profits with Macrotech. Some scavengers, nicknamed “ghouls,” have taken to squatting in drifting wrecks, bringing in their own supplies and life support systems rather than living in Wargrave Station. Some ghouls secretly work for other corporations eager for a share of the Wargrave’s relics. Others are on the run from interstellar patrol or navy authorities, or are pirates who prey upon the “legitimate” scavengers. It’s rumored that, among them, are the remains of the Jackal’s original pirate squadron, privy to secrets of the Wargrave unknown to anyone else. Macrotech, in return, has placed a bounty on the pirates.

Scavengers typically use small, cheap vessels – many of them “tin cans” with a tiny spacedrive and life-support system – to drift from wreck to ship, using scanners to check for worthwhile finds. Macrotech demands the first right to purchase anything found, from a few hundred credits for every ton of salvaged alien hull metal to the tens of thousands paid for rare discoveries like intact alien weapon systems or spaceship components – or the bodies of their crews. Often it takes weeks or months to find anything valuable, and after a long stretch in space, many scavengers return only to blow the meager profits they made in Wargrave Station’s wild entertainment district.

With the prosperity brought by the salvage operations, Wargrave Station has grown. It now houses some 5,000 permanent residents, among them a few hundred scavengers, and is becoming a valued entrepot for trade with frontier worlds. This is leading to rivalry between Macrotech and other large interstellar corporations, some of which may be subsidizing claim jumping and piracy in the Helix Nebula system.

Adventure Hooks

People may come to Wargrave Station to seek alien salvage, hunt pirates for Macrotech’s bounty, or become embroiled with the criminal or corporate syndicates that prey upon and pay the scavengers. Alternatively, they can join an archaeological expedition probing the mysteries of the alien battlefield.

While many active payloads are recovered, the debris – inactive spacecraft, spent rockets, and small objects – remains. Spent rockets may explode due to the interaction of radiation from outer space and remaining unused fuel. And uncontrolled objects collide with each other or with meteorites, creating even more debris.

– Bheendra Jasani and Martin Rees, “The Junkyard in Orbit”

On Terra, Conn had told his friends that his father was a prospector, leaving them to interpret that as one who searched, say, for uranium. Rodney Maxwell found quite a bit of uranium, but he got it by taking apart the warheads of missiles.

*– H. Beam Piper, **Junkyard Planet***

OBJECT HX-27: AUXILIARY SCOUT SHIP (?) (TL10[^])

This unstreamlined 300-ton (SM +7) Coalition ship was discovered by Macrotech combat archeologist team Vulture 27. It was found drifting in the company of drifting wreckage of four other Hydran vessels. The 120'-long ship consisted of a triangular front and peanut-shaped rear module, made of a green glass-like ceramic-metal. Machinery was mostly TL10 with extensive sensor and jamming antenna of exotic design and rear facing weapons, suggesting a scout ship role.

Parts of the hull not damaged by weapons fire were densely covered with cartoon-like drawings of alien life showing what appeared to be a simple pastoral culture at odds with the high-tech spacecraft. Other oddities noted included dense wooly "carpeting" on all floors (often 2' deep), kitchens with cryogenic tanks full of frozen mouse-sized tentacled bats in suspended animation, and flush toilets built directly into all control seats (but not cabins!). The crew, dead from radiation and blast damage, were a hitherto unknown Auxiliary species: brown, hulking 10'-tall creatures with four eyes, insect-like mandibles, and exoskeletal armor. While Vulture 27 were exploring, one of them suddenly came to life and attacked with a powered axe-like weapon. After it was destroyed, its torso was found to contain an animating maggot-machine.

Front Hull System

[1-2]	Metallic Laminate Armor (total dDR 14).
[3!]	Stardrive Engine.
[4]	Tactical Comm/Sensor Array (comm/sensor 8).
[5-6]	Habitats (each has two cabins).*
[core]	Control Room (C7 computers, comm/sensor 6, three control stations).

Central Hull System

[1]	Metallic Laminate Armor (dDR 7).
[2]	Engine Room.

Central Hull System

[3-4]	Defensive ECM.
[5-6]	Fusion Reactors (total four Power Points).*
[core]	Habitat (one bunkroom, four hibernation chambers).

Rear Hull System

[1-2]	Metallic Laminate Armor (dDR 14).
[3-4]	Major Battery (fixed 100 MJ gravitic-focus particle beams).*
[5-6!]	Hot Reactionless Drives (1G each).*

* One cabin, one major battery, one drive, and both power plants are disabled.

Ship has only 4 dHP. Disabled areas are unpressurized. It has a stealth hull and artificial gravity. Study of the sensors reveals a new design switch, the gravitic focus array.

Gravitic Focus Array (TL[^])

Comm/sensor arrays may use gravitic focus (*Spaceships*, p. 33) to boost their range. Gravitic focus sensors require one Power Point to operate but get 10x active sensor and comm range when activated.

ABOUT THE COLUMNIST

David L. Pulver is a Canadian freelance author. An avid SF fan, he began roleplaying in junior high with the newly released *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*. Upon graduating from university, he decided to become a game designer. Since then, David has written over 70 roleplaying game books, and he has worked as a staff writer, editor, and line developer for Steve Jackson Games and Guardians of Order. He is best known for creating *Transhuman Space*, co-authoring the *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* anime RPG, and writing countless *GURPS* books, including the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*, and the recent *GURPS Spaceships* series.

TL	Spaceship	dST/HP	Hnd/SR	HT	Move	LWt.	Load	SM	Occ	dDR	Range	Cost
10 [^]	HX-27	50	-1/5	13	2G/c	300	1.2	+7	12ASV	14/7/14	1x	\$27.4M

WELL PAST ALIEN ENCOUNTERS BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

Within the context of most science-fiction settings – especially in worlds of space opera – the vast majority of aliens aren't really all *that* alien. They may not always be humanoid, and their social habits and societal mores may be off, odd, or downright weird. However, they can at least stand their ground with humans within a cosmopolitan universe, as they tend to be physical beings that operate on the same scale as we do, and can – and will – communicate with us.

Of course, exceptions always exist. Generally speaking, the further a species deviates from the three goalposts of scale, physicality, and communication, the more alien it becomes. In the absence of such technical wonders as universal translators or language implants – or in cases where they simply *do not work* – dealing with such beings can be difficult, and quite possibly very dangerous.

But what's a space game without the thrill of snatching discovery from the jaws of cold oblivion?

In the spirit of fostering some interstellar confusion in a cosmopolitan science-fiction setting, the following very alien races, anomalies, and hazards are presented in generic terms. They all are at least one goalpost short of being able to easily interact with baseline humans, and are listed from least to most dangerous. Humanity's interactions with them are detailed, and the problems keeping them from having a true meeting of the minds with us are given.

THE PERSEUS CUBES

When humanity sent forerunner ships off into the Perseus Arm of the galaxy, their long-range scanners kept getting strange readings. They seemed to indicate the existence of large metallic objects, found singly or in groups, which were clearly moving but had no energy signature. While noteworthy, they weren't planets or alien spacecraft, so their sightings were catalogued and left for another time.

It wouldn't be until the colonization of planet P-B-675 that the objects were viewed up close. A cluster

of them were gathered around one of that planet's outer moons, giving the ship a chance to send a probe. What they saw challenged many ideas on xenobiology, and posed questions that have yet to be satisfactorily answered.

The beings were giant metal cubes, ranging anywhere from about 15' to 106' per side. Their sides were smooth and featureless, and they seemed to have no limbs. They had no visible physical senses yet were apparently able to perceive the approach of the probe. They also had no visible means of propulsion but were able to move closer to the probe, or away from it.

Lost in Space Translation

As a rule of thumb, the more challenging it is to communicate with an extraterrestrial, the more *alien* that extraterrestrial seems.

Physical or written speech is "normal," no matter how difficult or exotic the alien tongue may be. Even mental telepathy is "normal" to an extent, so long as we're hearing words or seeing recognizable images. But what do you do when the aliens communicate in ways we can neither comprehend nor easily detect, and cannot readily respond in?

There's an entire universe of possibilities for alternate modes of communication. They could speak through smells, tastes, pheromones, bodily waste, or shifting lights. They could employ temperature or pressure changes, radiation levels, and magnetic waves, which baseline humans would have a hard time picking up on and replicating without special modifications or equipment.

There's also the issue of whether they *want* to talk to us at all. In order for proper communication to occur, both parties must be trying to converse, and be aware that the other party *is* speaking. Otherwise, it's all missed cues and background noise, perhaps coupled with one party's haughty insistence that these tiny, bipedal beings aren't intelligent enough to bother conversing with.

*Cube, alone again, tried something else. She summoned a nickelpede.
The creature appeared, looked around, and glanced curiously at her.*

– Piers Anthony, *Cube Route*

The probe tried to communicate with them, using various hailing frequencies, but it gained no reaction from the metal giants. After buzzing around both the probe and each other for a time, the cubes moved off in a group. That particular group has not returned to that moon since, though others have passed by from time to time.

Since that first encounter, various groupings of cubes have been sighted throughout that galactic arm. They have never been seen to consume anything, nor excrete, so what keeps them going is a total mystery. They seem to be able to communicate with one another, but no one can detect how. Dead ones have never been seen, though there is some speculation that solitary cubes are going off somewhere to die, perhaps in the heart of a star. They travel so fast as to be impossible to follow, though.

They *have* been witnessed spawning, which is fascinating. This entails two or more cubes apparently becoming semi-solid, and overlapping their corners to make a perfect cube

within the two entities. They then pull away, leaving a new, much smaller cube between them. These new cubes do not seem to need much in the way of nurturing or instruction, as they quickly take their place in the group and follow along.

Normally placid, the cubes are quick to anger if threatened. One documented case says that a vessel of rogues fired their lasers at a cube to see what would happen. The cube was undamaged, and both it and its fellows flew after the ship and crushed it between their bodies.

THE GHOSTS OF MIMAS

About 100 years after humanity put a water-mining base on Saturn's oddest moon, strange neighbors moved in.

They appeared quickly, arriving in large, slightly transparent spheres of varying sizes. The miners barely had time to realize what they were seeing – and what the instruments said was *not* there – before the smaller spheres began dividing, like cells. In the blinking of an eye, almost a tenth of the moon was covered with an enclosed network of them, and then the vaguely humanoid aliens emerged from the larger spheres to take up residence in their new home.

A diplomatic party was hastily thrown together, but to no avail, as the invaders could not see the humans. Both they and their structures were completely intangible, and, except for a minor level of strange radiation, the sensors insisted there was nothing there. It was like trying to talk to ghosts.

As the aliens weren't leaving their compound or consuming Mimas' resources, and seemed nonbelligerent, Earth's government decided to treat it as a scientific curiosity. Numerous scientists arrived on Mimas to watch the aliens nonstop, relishing the opportunity to observe another sentient species without being observed in turn. Over the next 50 years, most of the ghosts' social structure and biological habits were discovered, and though their language still remained a barrier, it was discerned that they are the advance wave for a much larger group of colonists.

Recently, a serious problem has been discovered: constant exposure to the ghosts' low-level radiation causes irreversible sterility in humans. Appropriate biochemical countermeasures can be taken to prevent this from happening, but the success rate is only 50%. This means that if the rest of the ghosts arrive, and they leapfrog from Mimas to another, more populated moon or planet, they could unwittingly doom the human population there to eventual extinction.

Querying the Cubes

The Perseus Cubes are a legitimate rarity: metallic organisms that evolved in the weightlessness of space, descended from strange overlaps of energy and matter.

They call themselves the Many. Most of them are actually further outside the Perseus Arm, and travel in massive flotillas of a thousand or more cubes of varying sizes. The ones humanity has encountered thus far are merely explorers, out seeing the wonders of the universe and seeking new, richer areas to feed in. The flotillas will eventually follow, perhaps millennia from now.

The cubes tap into the fundamental forces that underlie the universe. They absorb raw energy to survive, and utilize its unseen network to communicate with each other over truly extensive distances. It also provides them with their motive power, though travelling too fast for too long takes a lot of out of them.

Generally gentle and peaceful, and potentially immortal, the Many have existed for billions of years. They have a deceptively simple, nomadic culture based on the constant communication of stories, experiences, and ideas. They consider a quiet, solitary death in a star a "reward" for having created as many children as they want, and spread their own views as far as they can personally conceive.

These strange cubes could teach us much about the history and true workings of the universe, but unfortunately, they don't think we're all that interesting. They'd rather try and communicate with our ships and probes, which sadly don't give them intelligible responses. They're more used to conversing with asteroids, moons, and planets, which they can "read" like books, and sometimes find a kindred, if primitive, intellect hiding within.

Whispering to Ghosts

The ghosts are almost exactly what the humans have observed: alien colonists working their way outward. Peaceful if possible, belligerent when necessary, and on occasion hostile, the Milanar are no worse or better than any other race.

The aliens are one step “below” our dimension – inhabiting a parallel universe that closely mirrors ours, but has a few differences. Their technology draws on the energy of our dimension, which both brings them just a little closer to us, and spreads dangerous radiation into our world.

If we could build machines to mimic Milanar technology, we could also go that step “below,” and conceivably interact with them. If this works, we could warn them of the danger their machines are causing our reality. But whether they would listen, ignore our pleas, or become hostile is unknown; how would *we* handle the news that our energy source was endangering beings in a parallel reality?

THE BLESUNBULLA DIRECTIVE

Blesunbulla (pronounced “BLAY-soon-BULL-ah”). General meanings: “relax,” “take it easy.” Etymology: *unknown*.

Blesunbulla. It’s one of those foreign loanwords that appears from nowhere and is suddenly everywhere. Incredibly versatile, it can be noun or verb, and languidly slides from the tongue at any appropriate juncture. In fact, as soon as someone hears it, and gains a general idea of what it means, it’s hard to *not* say it.

“Hey man, blesunbulla, I’ll do it later.” “She’s taking a blesunbulla. I’ll help you.” “Those blesunbullas are so lazy, but I envy them.” “Can’t we all just blesunbulla?”

It’s in songs and films, books and games. Actors and singers drop it in speech all the time. Reporters and politicians slip it in prepared remarks to sound hip. Space workers trade it back

and forth with aliens for laughs, and sometimes find out they already know it.

Blesunbulla. Who *doesn’t* want to take it easy in this day and age? Humanity hurtles into space and beyond, exploring this and colonizing that. What’s wrong with just lying back in the push-button, prefabricated cities and letting the technology work for you? Would it really hurt to just snuggle with friends, put on some soft music, and watch the stars go by?

Some people get it, but some people don’t. There’s official talk about this “craze” being a bad thing. They say there’s evidence of increased activity in people’s pleasure centers – misfired neurotransmitters and overtaxed joy circuits. Unregulated junk food and odd diet choices from offworld seem to be to blame, but the studies seem inconclusive, and are usually championed by xenophobic elements.

Those who understand seem to be part of a large and invisible fraternity. They nod to similarly relaxed strangers in the street, and strike up lazy and gentle conversations. They offer things to those in need and let their fellow relaxers crash out at their place for days on end, just knowing that they’re good for it. They’re “in,” after all.

“This sleep upon us,” they whisper like a lullaby, hugging in the dark as another wave of relaxation drifts by. Blesunbulla, brothers and sisters. Blesunbulla.

THE WHISTLERS OF SILENCE

Planet XJ-45 was seemingly perfect: a textbook “Goldilocks” planet with reasonably Earth-like conditions, no serious toxins in the water, suitable atmospheric conditions, and no competing lifeforms. A forerunner ship was launched to evaluate its practical suitability, and when it arrived, the explorers fell in love with the place almost immediately.

The love was not returned. By the end of the week, the surviving forerunners had packed up and left, claiming they were being attacked by unseen aliens. The attacks came in the form of horrible, nonstop, eardrum-busting waves of sound. A few crewmembers tried to fight back by shooting wildly, which was met with the sound increasing in decibel until their organs were pulped inside their skin.

Catching the Blesunbulla

The xenophobes are right, up to a point. Those who “get it” *are* producing more relaxing neurotransmitters than they should be. But it’s not because of extraterrestrial foodstuffs or bad candy bars. It’s because they now have immaterial aliens living inside their brains.

Blesunbulla is a living meme: a sentient idea that can transmit itself to other humanoid brains through audible signals. The idea is simple – one should be more relaxed, trusting, and at ease with one’s fellow sentients. This sets up a feedback loop that ensures a near-constant release of pleasurable neural chemicals, which the meme functions best in.

It doesn’t always take, as some people’s gray matter is more resistant to such invasions. But those who are

infected essentially catch the full package: a mostly beneficial “rider” that becomes a part of the carrier’s own personality, and nudges him toward stress-free living. The meme replicates and reinforces itself every time its name is uttered in the correct, blissful context, and occasionally gives its hosts visions of the long, strange trip it took to get to this world.

Communicating with the Blesunbulla is no problem – anyone who’s a carrier can talk back, after all. That said, the meme has no technology to share, no culture to offer, and no politics to get in the way. It just wants to spread joy (read: itself) from world to world, one word at a time.

C-3PO: I do believe they think I am some kind of god.

Han Solo: Well, why don't you use your divine influence and get us out of this?

C-3PO: I beg your pardon, General Solo, but that just wouldn't be proper.

Han Solo: Proper?

C-3PO: It's against my programming to impersonate a deity.

– *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*

Undaunted, Earth sent a team of first-contact specialists to see if they could unravel the mystery. They didn't have to wait long to be noticed, and through a painstaking and unnerving process of trial and error, communications were established. The aliens' odd language structure made it hard to pin down who and what they were, but in spite of that, a diplomatic agreement was reached.

As a result of that agreement, humans have been living on XJ-45 – now called Silence – for two generations, now. They live inside soundproof domes, and are prohibited from making any noise over 60 decibels while outside of them.

The humans call the natives the Whistlers, and have conjectured that they are either invisible, or else create sonic projections from a distance. Attempts at clarification have led to appropriately circular conversations that leave humans baffled and Whistlers seemingly amused.

Unfortunately, the Whistlers have learned to speak in *our* language, and what they have to say is very unsettling. Clearly fascinated by humanity, they'd like to "see" more of their neighbors. Some of the things they want shown are clearly

taboo, sometimes outright grotesque, and occasionally would maim or kill the participants.

The Whistlers do not seem to value the concepts of privacy or self-preservation, and there is worry that they may begin acting belligerently. They have certainly intimidated as much, and the colonists wouldn't know the fight was upon them until it was too late.

THE DIRECTORS

For the longest time, humanity heard rumors of a strange race at play amidst the cosmic winds. They were supposedly a race of dominators, who were seen and felt only by their victims – a race whose victims eventually became little better than puppets, and then wound up dead. Those who spread the stories called them the Directors.

Apparently, the first sign of the Directors comes when some people start seeing shadowy presences out of the corner of their eyes. The visions would be fleeting at first, and most likely ignored as stress or fatigue. Soon they'd become more frequent, and gain some definition of shape and form, however vague.

By then it was too late – the beings could now hurt them. Victims would suffer bad headaches and phantom pains at first, and then serious things, like slurred speech, slowed reflexes, blackouts, and memory loss. If they sought medical help, the pain got even worse, blacking them out for an hour or so.

At that point, the Directors would begin ordering their victims about. The half-seen shapes would gesture in a direction, or at an object, and if the victim didn't do what they wanted, he'd suffer a sudden, extremely excruciating headache, or worse. It often took hours of painful guesswork for a victim to do what was wanted, but the Directors didn't seem too worried about time.

After weeks or months of strange, quixotic actions – all of which generally got the victims away from their home planets, duty stations, or postings – all victims eventually wound up dead. They were invariably drowned in a body of water: everything from a storage tank on a spaceship to a lake or a sea on some distant, habitable – and always *inhabited* – planet.

Though a scary story, it's never been proven. There has been no official contact with any such race. All the telepathic beings humanity knows of claim they know nothing about such beings, and if anyone is using technology to puppet people around, they haven't been found yet.

Sounding Out the Whistlers

The sonic projections *are* the Whistlers. The physical realities of planet Silence have created a life form based on sonic energy: whirling knots of "I am" that change frequency and pressure to communicate, manipulate, injure, and even kill.

Normally mild and curious, their ire was raised when the human forerunners started fractious and noisy mining operations. The loud noises disrupted their self-songs, effectively wounding them, so they reluctantly decided to kill to protect themselves. Thankfully, the next group of humans was willing to discuss things, and once the agreement was made, they began to treat the humans as equals.

But part of the equality was expecting the newcomers to conform to their culture of total, naked honesty and complete self-revelation. They know that satisfying their curiosity about the glory of physical bodies could kill the humans they query, but that does not matter – only the truth. The humans' unwillingness to totally share that truth is a grave insult, and one that will not be brooked for much longer.

Spotlighting the Directors

The Directors *are* real, but those searching for telepaths or technology are looking in the wrong direction. They need to look within.

Some time ago, a strain of parasitical bacteria on a backwater planet gained sentience. The strain formed its own civilization within the waters of its world, with entire generations living and dying in the space of days. Before long, it became the dominant aquatic species, learning to control the simple creatures they infested by causing them pain if they failed to do what they wanted.

Eventually, explorers and colonists came to their planet. They drank the water, believing it safe, and the strain entered their bodies, seeing through their eyes and listening in on their thoughts. Before long they realized they could spread their empire throughout the universe, if they could only control these beings as they controlled so many others.

Thus were born the Directors. They enter a body, multiply, and infect the neural matter. Once there's enough of them, they can work in concert to inflict pain though the nerves, cause optical illusions (the half-seen shapes) and make bodily systems fail to function correctly.

Through a process of punishment and reward, the Directors steer their victims to planets where the strain does not yet exist. After driving them to immerse themselves in virgin water, they make them lose consciousness just as the body is too exhausted to stay afloat any longer. Then they wait for the process of decay to expose them to their new territory, so they might conquer yet another world.

The microscopic and monomaniacal Directors don't care to communicate with their victims beyond the eventually fatal cycle of discipline and punish. They are obviously aware that *we* exist, but see us only as gigantic beasts of burden with only one thing to offer them.

As far as the authorities are concerned, it's just a joke that aliens play on humans, or that spaceport scum use to beg rations from incoming pilots and colonists. Nothing more.

THE EMPIRE OF ZYX

The conversion wave of the Big Bang – an unassailable wall of promethean energy – travels ever out from the center of the universe, changing whatever lies beyond it into the raw, boiling stuff of creation. The wave is swift and dangerous, but gives scientists the opportunity to see how things may have truly begun, untold aeons ago.

Occasionally the energy wall spits up something it couldn't digest. These mostly molten relics of the next universe over do not usually last long before they're overwhelmed by our universe's apparently inimical physical laws. But there have been exceptions.

The largest object to ever come through was a cracked and broken planetoid about the size of Earth's moon. The science vessel *Atreides*, following the wave, sent a number of small probes back to study it. Much to their surprise, the planet was still there by the time they traveled out of the probes' realtime broadcast range, so they alerted the scientific corps to its strange longevity.

By the time the corps mustered a vessel, the *Anaraxes*, and sent it out to study the object, the *Atreides'* probes had been destroyed. Strangely, the planet was now about the size of Earth, with two small moons. Long-range scanning indicated that there was no life on the barren, airless rock, but when the ship sent its own probes toward it, the probes exploded, and green beams of light shot from them to one of the moons.

A second look at the moons revealed impressive though antiquated defense banks, which seemed to be repairing themselves. Undaunted, the *Anaraxes'* captain sent more probes to inspect the moons, but these were also shot down in the strange, almost backward fashion. So the ship stayed put and took readings.

Over the next few days, the planet changed dramatically. A wispy atmosphere developed, putrid seas bubbled into being,

and strange and scraggly end-of-days species scuttled across their shorelines. More structures formed on the moons, and smaller, artificial objects began to form from seemingly nothing in orbit.

Fascinated, the ship's crew relayed all the data they could back home, right up until the moment their signal was lost. The *Tarsus* was dispatched to investigate, and discovered two things: the blasted wreck of the *Anaraxes*, and a planet that could now support human life, but seemed devoid of anything but simple species.

There was also a massive black tower looming over the northwestern continent – stretching almost into space. Sensors revealed that the tower *was* inhabited, so the ship sent out a hail on all frequencies. Seconds later, the *Tarsus* exploded, and beams of green light flew from the doomed ship to both moons and some of the artificial objects in orbit.

Neytiri: You have a strong heart. No fear. But stupid! Ignorant like a child!

Jake Sully: Well, if I'm like a child, then look, maybe you should teach me.

Neytiri: Sky People cannot learn; you do not See.

Jake Sully: Then teach me how to See.

– *Avatar*

Clocking the Zyx

The military has it completely wrong. The green beams aren't energy being destructively siphoned away from the stricken ships and probes. They're energy weapons being shot in reverse, just as everything on that nameless planet is being done in reverse.

The planet is going backward in time.

The "Zyx" – actually the Xyz – came of age at the very edge of their doomed universe, and were its greatest and most feared space empire. Bipedal, oviparous humanoids descended from froglike things, they could secrete poison through their skin, and "sting" nearby victims with a flick of their tongue. Poised to conquer from day one, they did so with peculiar relish.

Like most great empires they eventually fell into decay and decay. They might have been wiped out by a rival, except that their universe started to be destroyed around them, and a rolling wave of entropy gobbled up what little remained of their empire. Somehow their home planet survived, though whether there was something unique about its makeup or the strange science they employed may never be known.

But they began to age backward in this strange, new universe. It has remained steady at the rate of a dozen

years per hour, starting from what little was left of their homeworld when the wave was done with it.

This is why the planet was seen to regrow itself, reform its moons, and rebuild its defenses, atmosphere, and ecosystem. This is also why their ships performed that strange, post-destructive dance: They were engaging in combat maneuvers against foes that seemed to be assembling themselves, in spite of their laser fire. Then they retreated when they determined they could not destroy them, and were relieved when they simply left.

The homeworld is now at its height of deadly sophistication, but humanity has one saving grace: the rapid reverse-aging effect is tied to the planet. Once their ships leave it, they're still going backward in time, but in real-time. Pilots on short, simple patrols return home to learn they've been away for scores of years.

This discovery has led to an uncharacteristic unwillingness to risk conquering this otherwise-ripe, new reality. There is talk amongst the Xyz of sending out a long-range warship, in the hopes that, when it gets far enough away from the homeworld, the time distortion will fade. Whether these long-range warriors will then experience the rest of the universe *forward* in time remains to be seen.

The military's science corps decided to pursue the matter as a possibly hostile first-contact situation. They sent a few warships, and kept the smallest, fastest ship in the flotilla some distance behind, so as to relate what happened in case the others were lost. This proved a tragically prescient move.

The other warships' last transmissions were to report that small, extremely fast spacecraft were racing toward them. They hailed the aliens, and then exploded, and bolts of green fire flew from the wreckage to the alien spacecraft as they swiftly flew over the burning debris field.

Then the other spacecraft did something truly odd: They began a quick and complicated dance of what seemed like

combat maneuvers, effortlessly catching the remaining green bolts emanating from the destroyed ships as they seemingly went wild. When the eccentric bolts had all been caught, the craft returned to a tight formation, looped back around, and returned to the planet as quickly as they'd come, completely ignoring the smaller vessel.

After that, the military decided they were dealing with a "vampire planet": a race that drained energy from others. Obviously, they were using that power to rebuild their wave-shattered planet, and any other ships that came into contact with them would suffer the same fate. A blockade was declared, a patrol created, and all further unauthorized contact forbidden.

The military still sends transmissions to the mysterious planet, hoping to convince them that we still mean no harm. All they have received in return is an extremely fast, looped message in a fricative, lisping language – one in which the word "zyx" is repeated several times.

It's hard to be sure, given the possible complexity of any language, but that message seems extremely unfriendly.

*He says the sun
came out last night.
He says it sang to him.
– Project Leader,
Close Encounters
of the Third Kind*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He's also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

ALIEN STARTING CONDITIONS

BY **STEPHEN P. KOHLER**

What shapes an alien species? One race may be slaving warmongers and one may be tree-hugging hippies, but they don't get that way overnight. Their outlook on life, other races, and the universe depends on both circumstances and conditions, mixed together in ways no being could predict, blended over millions of years. But what if you don't want to wait that long?

A highly sophisticated system of esthetics lay behind the decor. We would have to revise our entire estimate of Martian culture.

– Roger Zelazny,
“A Rose for
Ecclesiastes”

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

A frazzled GM finds himself at wit's end. The heroes have gone off the beaten path, into an unplanned area of space. Now the PCs want to interact with the natives, and the GM wants something more original than a bug-eyed monster with blasters in every appendage. And if you give a player one new alien race, they'll come up with the need for five more.

Stats are easy to generate, and a few minutes with *GURPS Space* will give the GM some ideas on good creature descriptions. However, if he just uses the basic races described, players

will quickly learn what to expect – these guys will try and kill us, those guys will give us whatever we say we need, etc. So why not have a few simple tables to combine a couple different factors to generate new, interesting templates in the time it takes to roll a couple of dice?

A basic alien template consists of only a few data points: what kind of homeworld the aliens have, what major physical adaptation they possess, and what method they used to achieve leaving their planet and entering the wider universe. These features allow the GM on the go to not only generate some basic, major characteristics of their new race in a few seconds, but also give them an idea of what kinds of planets they like (there's no place like home, after all), what kind of starships they most likely possess, and some interesting ideas about their appearance to make them stand out to the players.

HOME IS WHERE THE MAJOR CIRCULATORY ORGAN IS

What does a race's homeworld say about it? Every race had to start somewhere – evolve from little blobs of whatever into the forms your players encounter. Depending on what those blobs found when they had enough self-awareness to look around themselves and reflect on their place in the universe, those beings turn into very different things. Here are some ideas for what kinds of races would result from several different types of homeworlds (roll 1d or pick one that looks interesting).

1. *Extreme Resources*

A world of extreme resources either has a surplus (more than the race can use itself) or a dearth (less than they need for even basic activities). The resources in question can be whatever the GM finds interesting: an ore that is sacred to the race's religion, a plant that cures many of the race's diseases, etc. (Pick either “surplus” or “dearth,” or flip a coin.)

The two choices have two correspondingly different outcomes. A planet with high resources will create a race that is generally peaceful. This race will generally avoid conflict; with no need to fight over resources in the early days of the planet's history, they will instead seek other resolutions to problems. This is not to say that they will never battle, or that they will not be tough opponents once roused. However, fighting is a less savory option for this race. The opposite end of the range – a lack of resources – will generate an aggressive race. This race will prefer to fight its way out of its problems, with words, fists (or other appropriate appendages), or some other option. Aggressive races are hard to bargain with; they won't always make a deal . . . and when they do, they are just as aggressive at the bargaining table as in a warship.

2. Wispy Atmosphere

Homeworlds with wispy atmospheres don't have much between themselves and the vacuum of space. Their planets are often more barren and rocky than Earth-like planets. The natives feel quite at home both there and in space. They are vacuumphilic; great lovers of vacuum and vacuum-like environments. Vacuumphilic races are rovers of space; they can often be found in space stations and other non-planet-based installations. Naturally distrustful of planet-bound races, they are accepting of people who adopt their style of living.

3. Extreme Gravity

Planets that are high in gravity produce races that are built to survive the pressure. Evolving under such conditions could well lead a race to be – above all – authoritarian. Authoritarian races have a strict power structure that they respect, and they respect the same in other races. Depending on the race involved, they may be fine with other power structures in other races, or they may wish to establish their own over others (the GM should feel free to have fun with this!).

The flip side of the coin is low-gravity planets. These planets are often small, with light minerals and light inhabitants. Races from planets like this have trouble keeping their feet on the ground; space is another matter. In fact, races from these

worlds are well-suited to be true space natives. Space natives live up to their names; while vacuumphilic races rove space and live on space stations, space natives often go one further. They can generally be found in positions that put them in freefall as much as possible. Off planet, this is often in a space dock, working on some ship or another. Space-native races could prove themselves to be some of the best mechanics in the universe. On planets with higher gravity, they are found skydiving, or whatever the local equivalent is. As with planets with extreme resources, feel free to flip a coin to choose between the two if randomly establishing starting conditions.

4. High Radiation

Some planets, for one reason or another, have a notably high amount of background radiation. Maybe their atmospheres block less of their sun's radiation; maybe they have a high amount of radioactive ores in their planet's crust. Whatever the reason, races from such planets have evolved to be able to handle being riddled with radiation from birth to death. Such races are, to the rest of the universe, quite hearty. They can often live in places that other races cannot and may end up outcasts due to this. After all, when a race can live in a place that would be regarded as a toxic dump by other races, they are often made to . . . unless they are otherwise powerful or influential enough to avoid this.

5. Erratic Temperature

Some planets just don't know what to be. Whether it's a highly ecliptic orbit, a very slow revolution time, or some other reason, inhabitants of these worlds need to be able to handle a range of temperatures, often switching between them fairly quickly. In other words, they are extremophiles. High or low, they can handle them both. In fact, they are often uncomfortable in the middle. If races like this mix with other races at all, they generally do it from inside an environment suit of some kind. However, despite this, these races are generally able to converse and relate to many other races, able to handle extremes of personality as well as extremes of temperature.

The Martian flipped a furry hand toward the mountain range.

“You love this,” he said. “You can understand it. And I can understand how you understand it, but to me there is more terror than beauty in it. It is something we could never have on Mars.”

– Clifford D. Simak, “Huddling Place”

6. Fluidic

Fluidic planets have surfaces that are mostly liquid or gaseous. Races from fluidic planets are used to exploring much more of the world around them than races from other planets, and are often well-adapted to do so. To the rest of the universe – and often to themselves – they are likely to be the most inquisitive races out there. They want to know about everything, whether it is the shape of space, how hyperdrive engines work, or the darkest secrets of other races. It should come as no surprise, then, that races from fluidic planets are often found as spies and informers, as well as explorers and searchers of all kinds. Some of the universe's best detectives come from fluidic planets.

*He felt a sheer horror at the utter **alienness**, the **differentness** of those thoughts. Things that he felt but could not understand and could never express, because no terrestrial language had words, no terrestrial mind had images to fit them.*

– Fredric Brown,
“Arena”

WHAT MAKES A BEING?

Evolution can do strange things to creatures. Many evolutionary traits come about through random chance, the recombination of genes or the equivalent causing unexplained consequences and outcomes. These traits then survive because they allow their owners to live longer and reproduce while others die out. However, those traits add their own spin to how species live and view the world. Some examples of such traits are as follows (roll 1d or pick one that looks interesting).

1. Noncorporeal

These beings do not have solid forms, as such. Rather, they are comprised of energy, whether that is psychic, electrical, or some other form. They generally do not affect the world around them in the same way as their solid counterparts; while they can do many of the same things other races can do, they are so different in their methods as to be totally incomprehensible to the galactic community at large. For their

part, the noncorporeal races do not understand many of the actions of the intergalactic community, as they are totally non-materialistic. They do not draw any power or satisfaction from having most material things, and will generally stay aloof from most conflicts involving other races. The exception comes when the struggle is too great for any being to ignore, or when something truly important is at stake.

2. Superior Vision

There is a very thin slice of the electromagnetic spectrum that humans have titled the “visible spectrum.” Many beings possess the power to see outside that sliver; various races can sense ultraviolet rays, infrared light, and magnetic or radio waves. Such an ability can be represented with an advantage such as Acute Senses (Vision), Hyperspectral Vision, Ultravision, or Detect. These races have a literally different view on reality from others; they are epicurean in nature. They see the beauty in the universe around them, in the transmissions they send, and the heat of their bodies. They may also enjoy many of the finer things in life: fine foods, fast spaceships, and other such amenities are what they seek.

3. Subordinate Biome

Just because a homeworld is defined as (say) fluidic or high radiation, doesn't mean that there aren't areas within the world that differ from the norm. A “waterworld” could have islands, a radioactive world low radiation zones, etc. Races that have evolved to inhabit the subordinate biome live on these fringes. They are different from the vast majority of beings on their planet, and used to it. Any race that makes it to space on a non-dominant biome is a race that has proven at least once they can react to the world around them; they are an adaptive species. Adaptive species are the scroungers of the universe; they can find anything anyone needs, whatever the rarity . . . but always for a price. Some simply know the value of their product and seek to recoup their expenses; some go for a healthy profit.

4. Hive Mind

Most species have individual consciousnesses; each being does its own thinking, its own reasoning. Meanwhile, the individuals of a species with a hive mind have psyches that interact between each other without the need for audible communication, at the speed of thought. This can be done by radio waves, psychic energy, etc. Some races keep individual personalities within the aegis of the hive; others are the same mind in many different bodies. Either way, these races are unified in a way that the other races can only dream of. Whatever the race's goal, they all live it.

5. Inorganic

Not all races evolve at all. Some races are created by other beings from solid materials, while some are produced by psychic energy. These races are treated with various levels of disdain and fear by the galactic community. While they may need to consume resources, they are often not the sort of resources that others need – at least not for survival. Whether robotic races programmed by mad creators or psychic entities with no discernable origin, inorganics are often “alien” enough that other races are never sure what they're planning to do.

The inorganic races themselves tend to be apathetic. They are simply unable to show the same emotions or the same empathy as other races (since emotions are often rooted in biochemical responses that require an organic body). They do not need to be malicious; they may merely appear cold, even if they are acting in a helpful manner.

6. *Opposable Digit*

The ability to move a digit so that it can touch the other digits on the hand (or equivalent) is extremely valuable to an evolving race. Races with opposable digits come to tool use early on in their evolutionary state, and have more experience with them than races without. They often develop newer and better tools than other races; they are a technological group. To the rest of the universe, such races are extremely useful for their innovations. The technological races themselves have their own ends, but their means are easy: technology as the first and easiest solution to any problem.

GOING WHERE NO BEING HAS GONE BEFORE

The greatest moment in a species' history is when they leave the planet they have called home for countless eons and visit for the stars above. Each race finds its own route to the stars. Some routes are circuitous; some more direct. The method a species uses to achieve spaceflight says something to the rest of the universe; it sends a message that other races cannot fail to notice. Some classic methods known to the universe are as follows (roll 1d or pick one that looks interesting).

1. *Uplifted*

Some races take an interest in those less advanced than themselves. Whether for altruistic purposes or to advance their own goals, they help races' technology to reach the point where they can achieve spaceflight, often much faster than the uplifted race could have otherwise. These uplifted races are often at a lower TL overall compared to other races (there's no reason they couldn't be TL6!) and could be covetous of other races' technology. They will often go to great lengths to gain as

much knowledge as possible about the other races and what their technology can do; their own technology will quickly become a hodgepodge of TLs from other races; anywhere from a little below their own to two or three levels above.

2. *Happenstance*

The universe can be an odd place, full of strange events and coincidences. Every once in a while, chance contrives to send some piece of technology somewhere it was never intended to go. This technology can be anything from a data-storage device to a waste-disposal unit to a full spaceship. Whatever the technology, if it lands on a planet, the species there are quick to turn it to their own ends. Fortune like that tends to make a species optimistic in the extreme. After all, chance favored them once, so why would it not continue to do so? These species are well-known for phrases like "it will turn out all right" and "don't worry about it." They remain positive even if things are at their blackest, which at least makes them encouraging travel partners.

3. *World Effort*

Sometimes a world is forced to unite under one rule. Maybe there is some horrible event or an outside attacker. For whatever reason, a world government is formed, and under their umbrella, a successful space program is completed. Representatives of planets with world governments tend to be extremely diplomatic. As they have discovered the value and potential rewards of working together, they attempt to do the same with other races they discover, with varying success. Other races often view them with low levels of suspicion; after all, to their way of thinking, any race that tries so hard to get others to work together must have some ulterior motive.

4. *World Power*

A near opposite of the world effort is the world power. One world power, with domination over the others, leverages its strength into being the first nation-state on the planet to achieve spaceflight. Such nations are used to being the proverbial "biggest dog on the block" and don't take well to the realization that, when it comes to space as a whole, they are likely not more than little fish in a big pond.

My name is John Crichton, an astronaut. A radiation wave hit and I got shot through a wormhole. Now I'm lost in some distant part of the universe on a ship, a living ship, full of strange alien life forms. Help me. Listen, please. Is there anybody out there who can hear me? I'm being hunted by an insane military commander. Doing everything I can. I'm just looking for a way home.

*– John Crichton, in **Farscape***

*The aliens must be of a high degree of civilization if they had spaceships, and civilization does not develop without the development of foresight. These aliens must recognize all the implications of this first contact of two civilized races as fully as did the humans on the **Llanvabon**.*

– Murray Leinster, “First Contact”

This makes them extremely power-hungry; all of their actions taken as a species will be in the interests of enriching their species – or at least the world nation they represent. Observant observers will note that, although they will quickly unify against any outside threat, they in-fight constantly as a nation, and are always looking for threats from the other nations on their world, sometimes to the point of ignoring other races entirely.

5. Lone Inventor

Great beings can often change the course of events for entire nations or even worlds. Spaceflight, especially hyper drives, are extremely advanced technology, and are often considered impossible for quite a while after physics is generally understood on a world. But most species has “crackpots” – its mad scientists who dare to attempt the impossible. Most of them fail. Some fail in spectacular and fatal ways. But rarely, one succeeds. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it can't be put back. Such species are often overreaching; they run before they can walk. Often, they are not yet truly ready for the ability to travel through space at all. Of course, sometimes they make a niche for themselves once they get out into the universe. Sometimes, they trip and fall.

6. Recovered Knowledge

Sometimes the knowledge to leave a planet is right there on that planet all along. Maybe the inhabitants were once much more advanced, and fell (or were pushed) into barbarism before dragging themselves back up. Maybe their ancestors were traveling from one planet to another when their ship crashed, and the survivors lost what knowledge they had in the struggle to survive. Whatever the reason, the fallen have a tendency to rise and regain

their former position as travelers among the stars. Once they do, they may feel destined to regain their old glories. They believe that their return shows that it is right and proper for them to go to any lengths to recover all that they have lost, at any cost.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen P. Kohler is an all-encompassing gamer, including an education in game design and an interest in live-action roleplaying. He lives in Upstate New York with his wonderful girlfriend and boxes upon boxes of sci-fi and fantasy books. He is also very interested in breaking into the professional gaming industry.

The Melding of Possibilities

Much of the fun of using a random method of generating an alien race comes from coming up with explanations for how the three attributes are resolved within a species. An aggressive, unified, covetous race, for example, is easy to understand (and quite frightening, besides). But what about a hearty, apathetic, diplomatic race? Perhaps a race that uses their lack of emotion to broker peace between warring worlds as a truly neutral body?

Such questions will provide interesting constraints for creating new alien races, and should make a GM's life that much easier.

FIRST CONTACT

TWELVE WAYS IN WHICH WE DISCOVER ALIEN LIFE

BY MEGAN McDONALD

Are we alone in the universe? Maybe. But it is a lot more fun if we aren't. When dealing with aliens in a game setting it's imperative not to get too hung up on the actual science. More important than whether the aliens are just like us, or so different as to be nigh incomprehensible is how we react. At their heart, aliens are just a cipher: a way to test our precepts and to judge our actions. Here are 12 different scenarios, six in which aliens find their way to earth and six in which we find our way to them.

*We, the people of Earth,
greet you in a spirit of peace
and humility. As we venture out
of our solar system, we hope
to earn the trust and friendship
of other worlds.*

– Friendship 1 recording,
in *Star Trek: Voyager*
#7.21

ALIENS ON EARTH

The aliens have arrived, but what do they want? The best thing about having the aliens come to Earth is that it doesn't matter when the game takes place. There is no minimum technology threshold. You can have aliens drop in tomorrow, between the World Wars, or at the fall of the Roman republic.

Resistance Is Futile

Hostile aliens arrive in orbit, intent on taking what they need. Whether they're here to colonize the planet for themselves, strip-mine the oceans for their valuable resources, or

enslave lesser beings and ship them off to the salt mines on Galactica Four, the invasion has begun and the only thing left to do is fight back. Who are these evil alien overlords? As sci-fi classics like *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* have shown us, it doesn't matter. Your heroes can be a motley crew of scrappy survivors behind enemy lines, a hardened team of soldiers sent to deal with the threat, or a family on the run from the advancing alien hordes.

Welcome to the League of Planets!

A seemingly benevolent race appears in orbit and invites earth to join the interstellar United Nations: a diverse coalition of advanced, space-faring aliens. This doesn't have to be a *Star Trek* scenario. The visitors may not be interested in human cultural and scientific advancement. Maybe they need shock troops to fight a long-standing war or easily manipulated political allies in the Galactic senate. In a political thriller, the heroes can be a group of diplomats sent as ambassadors to the alien homeworld. In a grittier, street-level game, they may be insurrectionists intent on discrediting the alien visitors or scaring them away from Earth.

Pax Romana

A space-faring alien empire has decided to conquer Earth and incorporate it into their empire, but it's not all bad. Sure, they install a new, planetary government, collect taxes, and draft soldiers, but they also provide new technology, culture, and security from other invading forces. The story may follow a group of revolutionaries and freedom fighters attempting to overthrow the new government, members of a local bureaucracy tasked with easing the transition to the new order, or recent draftees sent off to alien boot camp.

They're Already Here

The aliens have lived in secret on the planet for decades or even centuries, subtly influencing human development and directing their cultural evolution. Are they pushing humanity toward peace and prosperity, or grooming it for their own needs? The heroes may have stumbled upon this vast conspiracy, been assigned to investigate it, or be in the employ of the alien overlords themselves.

Alien Anthropologists

Aliens occasionally appear on the planet to study humans, being careful to avoid disturbing their cultural and technological advancement. Best intentions aside, they've been discovered. Did they probe one too many Nebraskan farmers? Crash land in the New Mexico desert? Does everyone know about them, or are they being held in a secure, undisclosed location? The investigators may be soldiers guarding these important visitors, conspiracy theorists who've stumbled upon the truth, or innocent bystanders being held to prevent them from telling the world what they know.

Accidental Tourists

An alien craft crash-lands on Earth, its occupants disoriented and unsure of their current location. Are they friendly or hostile? Do they just want to get back home? As with the "Alien Anthropologists" scenario, the protagonists can be government workers who are in the know or civilians who discover the truth. Make this a fun, action-comedy game by having the protagonists be kids who want to help the friendly visitor evade capture.

HUMANS IN SPACE

The aliens don't have to come to us. For the GM who already has established space travel in his universe, having the human heroes take to the stars may be the best way to introduce aliens into the campaign.

We Come in Peace

The crew of the first manned mission to a distant planet discovers a sentient alien race. Are they welcomed as friends or feared as conquerors? The heroes can be the astronauts who make this pivotal discovery or a science or diplomatic team sent later to foster good relations. This is a chance to insert some culture-clash comedy, or play it straight as a political or action game. Up the stakes by having the aliens shoot down the visiting ship and force the adventurers to try to survive and escape the hostile planet.

Occupied

Human colonists on a distant planet discover that they are not the first to attempt to build a colony. They come into contact with an alien race so different they didn't even notice it was there until it started to fight back. The heroes may be the colonists themselves, a team of space marines sent to aid them, or a group of scientists sent to investigate whether the colonists are actually seeing things or just going space crazy.

At What Cost?

An alien race inhabits a planet whose resources are vital to the survival of the human race. However, mining this resource will mean the annihilation of the alien's homeworld (or otherwise rendering it unsuitable for the occupying species). The group of humans sent to deal with this scenario could be any combination of soldiers, scientists, diplomats, or professionals. How they choose to resolve the situation can turn the game into an action-oriented adventure, diplomatic thriller, or scientific mystery game.

Hail, the Conquering Heroes

The human empire colonizes its first inhabited world, declaring it a new part of the interstellar sovereignty. The story can be about finding and stopping alien dissidents, establishing a working government, or going rogue and fighting on behalf of the aliens.

Into the Fire

Humans stumble upon an intergalactic war that has raged for millennia, between two races they hadn't even known existed. Does humanity pick a side, try to negotiate a peace, or set up a profitable gun-running business? The adventurers can be diplomats, mercenaries, explorers, merchants, or any combination thereof.

Survivors

The last remnants of the human race become refugees in a thriving alien civilization. A street-level game might have the humans trying to survive as marginalized citizens. A mid-power game might start when the humans have already begun to assimilate into the alien culture. A high-powered political game might have the humans establishing colonies of their own, breaking down racial barriers, or trying to convince the aliens to accept more human refugees.

TURNING THE TABLES

Any of the above scenarios can be used in reverse – the heroes can take the role of the aliens. This expands the PC build options and can be a way to explore how non-humans would react in similar situations. A fun experiment might be to play the scenario with the PCs as humans, and then again from the other perspective to see how their motivations and actions change, if at all.

First contact policy was decided by the Security Council in 1968, and you've just gone and ignored it.

– President Winters, in Doctor Who #3.12

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan McDonald has been writing professionally since 2006, specializing in gaming, crafting, and cooking. Megan runs games at conventions and for friends, and has been playing roleplaying games (computer, tabletop, and play-by-email) for 15 years. Her life goals include being the first person to win a Pulitzer Prize for a video-game tie-in novel, and playing the voice of the computer in a movie, television show, or video game.

RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

A PLETHORA OF PROBLEMS

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

Who needs logical, well-designed aliens? Phooey! It's a big universe; there's room enough for craziness – especially if it keeps the players on their toes and makes for good gaming. To that end, one way to devise a new alien encounter is to ask two related questions:

- How big of a problem are these guys going to be?
- How long-running of a problem are these guys going to be?

With an answer to those questions in mind, you can devise a species that revolves around the problem. Here is a look at some of the options relating to these questions.

NOT A PROBLEM!

It's entirely likely that interactions with an alien species won't be terribly demanding at all. This is especially true in space-opera settings, where most "aliens" are more-or-less like us. Having straightforward aliens is a good way to populate a crowded universe; if the galaxy has 10,000 sapient species, having each one be extremely quirky and complicated will lead to a very challenging campaign – one that could be lots of fun if everyone is up for it!

A BIG ONE-TIME PROBLEM

On many science-fiction television series that feature contact with alien entities, there are often "one-shot" species. These races are frequently more puzzle than fully fleshed entities. As one example, in the episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entitled "Darmok," the crew encounters a race of beings who speak entirely in metaphor; the crux of the problem revolves around trying to figure out what the disconnect between the species is, and how to fix it.

The underlying assumption of the one-time problem is that the encountering species and the new alien race can have (reasonably) amicable relations, once they overcome the obstacle. That doesn't mean the situation is straightforward or even the result of a single problem; it's entirely possible that there are many fiddly bits that need to be overcome.

For example, the episode "The First Ones" of *Stargate SG-1* focuses on the first contact between a human and an alien . . . who has taken the human as a prisoner. The rest of the plot centers on figuring out language issues, cultural divides, and the immediacy of the "you're holding me captive in a filthy cave" situation. Still, once all those challenges were resolved, the possibility of long-term relations between both sides was relatively straightforward.

Some examples of one-shot problems include:

- Language or communication issues.
- Cultural complications (taboos, unusual customs, and the like).
- Accessibility difficulties (for example, a species that will only reveal itself once humanity accomplishes a certain technological feat or solves a certain puzzle).
- Environmental issues (for example, a race might be "aggressive" and "warlike" because their sun is about to go supernova, and they're looking for a place to suit their odd physiology. Solve the problem of the exploding sun, and they don't *have* to be mean anymore . . .)

A NOT-SO-BIG PROBLEM

Just about any of the big one-shot problems can be scaled back to smaller proportions. For example, maybe the alien language is complex but comprehensible enough that the heroes quickly realize they have a reasonable shot at analyzing and deciphering it if they have enough time. Or maybe the heroes are warned by one race about an upcoming first contact with another race – complete with a heads-up about some cultural taboos they should avoid.

Little solvable problems aren't generally good to form the basis of an entire adventure, but they still have their uses:

- They can provide a (minor) plot basis for a downtime adventure. (For example, while the heroes are providing escort duty to an undemanding diplomat, they can pursue any other subplots that have been simmering.)
- They can add a complication to another, larger adventure.
- They can add verisimilitude – not *all* problems are huge.

ONGOING PROBLEMS, BIG AND SMALL

For many alien species, even if you can figure out what the complication is that keeps the two races from having amicable relations, that's not necessarily enough to resolve it. The critters from the *Alien* franchise have a fairly straightforward complication, but there isn't a lot of middle ground on the whole "let us burrow into your chests and inject our spawn" discussion.

This is the default assumption for most antagonistic alien species in popular culture – especially the aggressive ones. Understanding that they want to kill us doesn't bring either side closer to a permanent resolution. However, not all ongoing problems are the sort that will prove life-threatening. They could merely be complicated or troublesome for continuing relations. (Getting to the moon has been an ongoing problem for Earth – even though we successfully did it a few times!)

Many of the disadvantages from *Alien Disadvantages* (pp. 4-9) can form the basis for prevalent complications. Some examples of ongoing troubles include:

- A tiny (even microscopic) species that exists in a much more accelerated timeframe than the rest of the universe. Generations pass for the species in the time it takes the heroes to try to interact with it, and it becomes a challenge to synchronize communications. ("We're close to coming to an agreement. Their near-forgotten legends speak of the beginning of this conversation . . .")

- An extreme difference in perspectives or lifespans. (Convincing a race with a 10,000-year lifespan that something is an urgent do-it-now problem can be a challenge . . . just ask the ents!)

- A species whose memories are extremely limited or wiped periodically. (Maybe they can only remember the past year with clarity, and need to augment everything beyond that with technological reminders.)

- There is a considerable difference between the intelligences of humanity and the species. This works in *either* direction. Super-intelligent beings would probably view us as if we were rabbits. . . and it's all-too-easy to envision a starfaring species that has managed to stumble and muddle their way to galactic prominence, riding the coattails of a handful of "geniuses" or by using advanced tech discovered on their homeworld.

Actually, many of the problems that we think of as "one-shot small problems" are *ongoing* small problems. As one example, learning an alien language may seem like a one-shot issue ("We now know their language; huzzah!"), but the issue can come up again – ignorant humans on an outpost might encounter the species, there may be more complexities with the language than we previously understood ("apparently the diplomat caste has a completely different language than the leadership . . ."), etc.

As another real-world example, I absolutely hate being called "Steve." For all those folks who know and realize this, it's not a big deal; they don't call me Steve, and I remain content.

For them, it's a "one-shot problem." However, I meet new folks all the time, and the situation arises fairly consistently; for me, it's an "ongoing problem."

Thus, even in a long-running campaign, it's perfectly permissible to revisit "solved" problems, and see how they can be reactivated or shaken up to become new problems again.

THE RESULT OF PROBLEMS

By starting with the problem and working backwards, you can come up with a memorable species. In fact, you can come up with *different* answers – all of which suggest different approaches and possible solutions. For example, consider the problem of "the aliens can fully resemble human beings." (This is a big ongoing problem if they're hostile, and a relatively minor issue if it's not.) Working backwards from that problem, you can end up with the aliens from *Alien*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *The Thing*, plus the Founders and Trill from the *Star Trek* universe, the Goa'uld and Tok'ra from the *Stargate* series, the Slitheen from *Doctor Who*, the creatures from *V*, and approximately 18 jillion others. All of these guys stem from the same problem, but they are all unique entities and can lead to different adventure possibilities.

This means that you can ruthlessly reuse problems to generate new species. The possibilities are only slightly more limitless than the universe. Search out the stars for new life and new problems!

Storytelling: Not Just for Professionals!

Some GMs might be concerned that coming up with problems for the heroes to overcome is tricky. After all, the folks who devise plots for SF shows, movies, and stories are professionals, who are paid big bucks to come up with good stuff.

Don't worry about it! Remember that novelists and scriptwriters control all elements of the story: dialog, pacing, decisions, etc. Most GMs don't have that luxury; those pesky players insist on running roughshod over the best-laid plans.

This means that gamers tend to be very understanding if a plot idea falls apart. Heck, if the players figure out the problem in the first 10 minutes, that's not a problem; it's a *feature!* The gamers will all feel smart, you can keep things spritely by having gangsters burst in with guns a-blazing, and everyone will have fun.

Plus, as an amateur storyteller, you have an advantage that the pros don't generally have: You can steal mercilessly from the pros, file off the serial numbers, and deliver it to the group on a platter. They'll gobble it up.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

ODDS AND ENDS

TRAVEL PLANS

One way to make an extraterrestrial species feel alien is to enable them to travel in a way different from the norm. Examples include:

- Direct teleportation technology (instead of FTL engines used by humanity).
- Warp gates (either on-world or in-system).
- Bio-powered vessels.

Unless the form of extraordinary transportation is the alien's main shtick in the cosmos, it's probably best to balance the unusual transport with some sort of problem. For example, if their ships can achieve instantaneous teleportation instead of using slower warp engines, then maybe their engines require a "recharging" time (significantly worse than making the trip via warp in the first place). It'll still give them a big edge – they'll be at their destinations much quicker than others – but it won't make them unstoppable . . . and it'll open up plot possibilities.

The aliens' transportation can even be *weaker* than the norm . . . if different. While this doesn't beef them up challenge-wise, it does open up other options. For example, perhaps the aliens' physiology requires their ships to use cryogenics, relying on a time-dilation effect of their warp drives to make the trip. (Each "one-week" jump of their ships actually takes 10 years . . . but the cryogenics keeps the crew from losing too many years of their lives.) No big deal, right? Except, what if the heroes – investigating this strange, new race – stowaway aboard one of the ships? It goes to warp without the heroes being in storage; they now either have to come up with a plan, or they have 10 years to mull it over . . .

FIVE ODDBALL ALIEN IDEAS

- They have detachable heads (mental abilities) that they can swap with each others' bodies (physical abilities).
- They *look* fake – like they're made of latex and foam rubber.
- They want to steal Earth's oceans – but only because it has some property that makes them intoxicated. This invasion is a giant bloodthirsty kegger party!

"Have you ever been in a cave?"

"In a cave! Of course not!"

"I thought not. I tried last week – just to see – but I got out in a hurry. I went in until the mouth of the cave was just visible as a blur of light, with black everywhere else. I never thought a person my weight could run that fast."

– Isaac Asimov, "Nightfall"

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



- They welcome missionaries; they mention something about "collecting" religions.
- "They came for our tribute bands!"

ABOUT *GURPS*

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