R:SPEC Rochester Speculative Literature Association, Inc.

Writing Workshop:
Creating Believable Alien Characters

by Alan Vincent Michaels

Presentation Synopsis

Creating believable and memorable *alien* characters are often the desired, central element of your speculative fiction story. Yes, you're creating beings that don't exist anywhere in the real universe, but your alien characters need to *seem* real enough to your readers so that a connection is made.

As in your life, the people you meet are defined by their dialogue, actions and interactions, physical attributes, and psychological and personality traits. In your story, your alien characters become believable when you give them a backstory and unique characteristics, get them interact with other alien and, if applicable, human characters in your story, share their internal thoughts and aspirations, and integrate them with their environments.

Some ideas about creating aliens and a few alien character-building exercises may be just what is needed to help you tell and sell your story.

What is an "Alien"?

The *English Oxford Living Dictionary* defines *alien* as:

noun
1. a foreigner, especially one who is not a naturalized citizen of the country where her or she is living
   1.1. a plant or animal species originally introduced from another country and later naturalized
2. a hypothetical or fictional being from another world

adjective
1. belonging to a foreign country
   1.2. (of a plant or animal species) introduced from another country and later naturalized
2. unfamiliar and disturbing or distasteful
3. supposedly from another world; extraterrestrial

As NASA and other space agencies continue to report the discovery of terrestrial, "Goldilocks"-type worlds, with some as close as Proxima Centauri (a mere 4.25 light years away), our imaginations run wild with images of fantastical environments and creatures. It seems it's just a matter of time before a true "Earth 2" is discovered.

In the meantime, speculative fiction authors extrapolate the planetary conditions and design the landscapes of distant worlds. Then, they dream up the creatures that inhabit them. And although many of these authors believe an alien *might* be a creature from a planet circling a distant star, there's no rule that dictates *your* aliens *must* come from another planet.

For the purposes of your story, you don't need to journey to the stars to meet aliens or even wait for them to come to Earth. Look around our planet and you'll find "aliens" living next to geothermal vents on the ocean floor, in the mud pots of Yellowstone National Park, and even on and in our own bodies.

Alternatively, if you subscribe to the *ancient aliens theory*, then your story might focus on aliens who have visited Earth in the distant past and then they left, or maybe they stayed and are still walking amongst us.

Your "aliens" can be all that you want them to be, telling stories for your readers to contemplate. Aliens, yes, but not necessarily *extraterrestrial* aliens.

There are many options for you to explore.

What is an "Alien Character"?

> "Alien means different. It does not mean pointed ears,
> a wrinkly forehead, or a crinkled nose. It means *different*!"
> – David Gerrold

> "Aliens should be *alien*. If it looks like a duck and
> quacks like a duck, you can call it *Rakumph*
> all you want, it's still an effing duck."
> – Veronica Sicoe

As of this presentation, we actually haven't *seen* or *met* a real alien from the stars. Out of necessity, authors and screenwriters are forced to create *alien characters* out of whole cloth to help tell their stories. It's really all they have to work with.

The myriad alien characters depicted in speculative fiction stories, novels, movies, and TV shows going back to the beginnings of speculative fiction creates a certain false sense that we "know an alien when we see one." These stereotypes can be limiting, especially if they're the only references you rely on for your characters.

Luckily, alien characters are as varied and diverse as their authors themselves and sometimes you might not even realize you encountered a fictional alien in a story until the last-minute reveal at the climax. This can make for a thought-provoking, introspective story that can stay with you for months or years. In other cases, you know from the outset the so-called aliens are really just humans with fancy makeups. Some of those types of movies will fade quickly from memory, but others will stay with you in spite of the low-budget effects.

In one extreme example, watch the conflict between Lokai and Bele, the half black and half white-colored aliens from the "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" episode of the original Star Trek TV series. The suspension of disbelief is more difficult with these types of alien characters, but it's a testament to Oliver Crawford's writing (and Gene L. Coon's original story) and Jud Taylor's direction that the human racial understory shows through despite the characters' low-tech make-ups.

A listing of Hollywood "alien" stereotypes is nearly endless. In many movies, the aliens are stunt people in rubber suits or metal contraptions, or actors with cheesy-looking makeup and prosthetics. In some movies or TV shows, the directors don't even try to disguise the human actor, except for small changes or minor physical tweaks.

Consider the Thomas Jerome Newton character in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. Portrayed by David Bowie, the alien has come to Earth looking for water to save his dying home world. Bowie's physical appearance was different enough that any overt artistic makeover wasn't necessary, aside from the added contact lenses. Certainly, it was cheaper to present the alien in this manner and let the story focus on the alien's fall into the depravities of the human condition. Newton becomes addicted to alcohol and sex at the same time he acquires great wealth through the patenting and selling of his alien technology. His alien physiology is revealed through a special X-ray process, and his true alien identity threatens his ultimate goal of building a space vehicle to transport water to his planet. In the end, he succumbs to his "human" failings. If the alien character in this story had been truly alien from the outset, the story would have been completely different.

Although the written word is a powerful tool to create images within readers' minds, the use of computer graphics and animatronics in some movies and TV shows have helped to greatly visualize otherworldly beings. Here's a short list, in no particular order:

- the heptapods in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*
- H.R. Giger's xenomorph alien in Ridley Scott's *Alien*
- the blue-skinned Na'vi in James Cameron's *Avatar*
- Patrick Tatopulos' night-loving aliens in David Twohy's *Pitch Black*
- Simon Pegg and Nick Frost's Paul in Greg Mottola's *Paul*
- the "prawns" in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*
- E.T. in Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*

These aliens are beautiful (or repulsive, depending on your personal preferences) to look at and they can be admired for their designer's attention to detail.

There are countless other movie alien characters that shall go unmentioned (except for the wretched Psychlo aliens from *Battlefield Earth*), because their poor design and shallow depth of character actually diminished the value of speculative fiction characters as a whole and of the role they play holding up mirrors to human society. Really, it is no wonder that many people disregard speculative fiction and, therefore, don't receive the stories that could have a great effect on their lives.

How far do you go in creating an alien character is up to you. Just remember that making an alien character so, well, alien, that your readers can't identify with or believe in the character will likely not serve your story well. Suspension of disbelief is essential to your speculative fiction story, but disbelief can't be suspended too much or your readers will search for something else to indulge in.

The alien characters you create can be whatever you need them to be and they can do whatever you need them to do. When developing your characters, ensure you make your characters **consistent** with themselves and their environments.

Make sure you create **whole** characters. A believable alien character is not, typically, an entity unto itself. It's part of and influenced by its environment and other characters and creatures that surround and interact with it. Consider what makes you *you*. You're greater than the sum of your parts, because you're influenced by everything around you.

And if your speculative fiction story includes humans, ensure to populate your speculative fiction story with separate *aliens* and *humans* – don't mix up the two or blur the differences in the process.

Finally, here are two points worth keeping in mind:

- You might have a great story idea, but, if it lacks well-developed alien characters, the story may be uninteresting and have a weak plot or an unfocused direction.

- If you don't have a good story idea, creating great alien characters could help write the story for you. Your characters will take on a life of their own. This isn't always a bad thing.

Visualizing Your Aliens – You Don't Need to Start from Scratch (But That Works, too!)

A time-honored technique for creating your own alien characters is to be inspired by what has come before.

Look for "alien" photographs wherever you can find them, such as:

- on the Internet (use images.google.com, but avoid those tabloid magazine images)

- on book and magazine covers

- in movies and TV shows, and

- artwork, books, and websites specifically focused on the science exobiology and depicting what aliens might look like and how they might behave.

These images can help you visualize the details of your own characters, regardless if it's a single character or an entire army, and help you avoid the clichés and pitfalls of stereotypical "aliens" that'll only serve to alienate your readers rather than elevate your story.
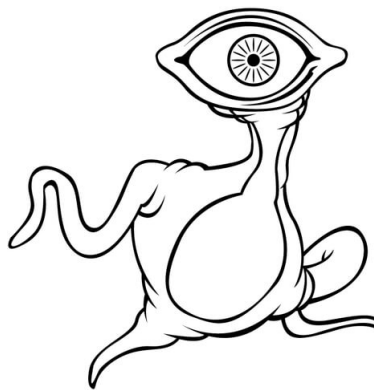
"Alien Cyclop" (from www.supercoloring.com)

If you have basic drawing and software tool skills, another approach is to create your own semi-realistic images of aliens:

- Take photographs and do "mash-ups" in Adobe® Photoshop® or another paint program.

- Draw or paint the characters you have in your mind in Photoshop or using traditional techniques.

- Rough sketch out character ideas (or even parts of characters) using simple line drawings on paper.

Anything that can help you visualize your alien characters more clearly will help you find the words to describe them to your readers.

Inspiration for what an alien might look like is all around you in nature right here on earth. There may not be a better candidate for "aliens that walk among us," than the water-dwelling, eight-legged, segmented micro-animals called tardigrades (also known as "water bears" or "moss piglets").
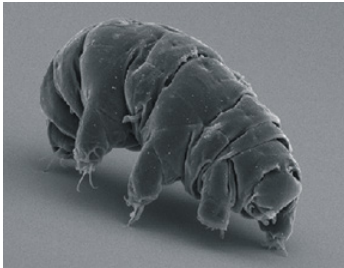
About tardigrades… Discovered by German zoologist Johann August Ephraim Goeze in 1773, they are not categorized as extremophilic, because they are not adapted to exploit the extreme environments in which they can be found. Nevertheless, they are the most resilient animal known to science. They can survive extreme conditions that would be rapidly fatal to nearly all other known life forms. They can withstand temperature ranges from 1 K (−458°F; −272°C) (close to absolute zero) to about 420 K (300°F; 150°C), pressures about six times greater than those found in the deepest ocean trenches, ionizing radiation at doses hundreds of times higher than the lethal dose for a human, and the vacuum of outer space. They can go without food or water for more than 30 years, drying out to the point where they are 3% or less water, only to rehydrate, forage, and reproduce.

Photo and text source: wikipedia.org

Finally, don't forget all the strange-looking deep-sea creatures that continue to be discovered. Often, the images and videos taken from aboard submersibles and remotely operated vehicles look like something photographed on a hypothetical, life-sustaining planet around another star.

Exercise #1: Do Some Basic World-Building

Your character is a product of its environment. You don't have to answer all of these questions now, but keep them in mind as you build the framework to support your character.

- What is the character's planet like?

  General planetary characteristics – gravity; geography; geology; climate; seasons, weather patterns, and prevailing winds; volcanism or other intensive changes to the geography; etc.

- What is the number of suns, moons, and planetary satellites?

  Is the sun brighter or cooler than Sol?

  What are tides like on the oceans? Are there oceans?

  How else do neighboring solar system or stellar bodies affect the character's planet?

- What is the planet's orbit?

- What is the nearby stellar neighborhood like?

- What ecology spawned this character?

- What does your character breath? Does it breathe?

- What does your character eat? Does it eat?

- How hostile is the environment?

- Is the atmosphere conducive to food production and species reproduction?

- What is the level of civilization and technology?

  Are there cities, villages, and other communities and what is the infrastructure like?

  Are the majority of dwellings or communities above or below ground?

  Are the inhabitants polluting the environment because of technology in use?

- What is the character's primary economy based upon?

- Was the world's history subject to more violence and oppression or was it more often peaceful?

- Is their culture influenced by their history?

- Have there been periods of time where the need for survival overtook civilization?

Exercise #2: Create Your Alien Character's Outline

Begin your alien character design and physical characteristics (size, shape, weight, height, coloration, skin type, number of appendages, eyestalks, asymmetrical physiology, etc.) by…

- thinking about **an alien character** from a favorite story or novel, then selecting one or two main character traits as a starting point for your character

  (examples: Tink Puddah from Nick DiChario's *A Small and Remarkable Life*; the Puppeteers from Larry Niven's *Known Space* books; the Guild Navigators from Frank Herbert's *Dune* series)

- thinking about **someone you know** who left a great impression in your mind, then extrapolating how their main character trait(s) could make them "alien"

  (examples: your uncle "Ted" (mother's side), who used to make and run moonshine; your brother Dan, who just happens to work for NASA; your half-uncle Bedrich, who was a lawyer for the Holy See)

- researching a real-life **historical figure** and fictionalizing their main character trait(s), extrapolating those traits into an alien context

  (examples: History is your oyster! Take your pick, except for Abraham Lincoln as a vampire hunter.)

- using an **alien character generator** to create a character completely from scratch

  (See "Selected Internet Resources" later in this presentation.)

Exercise #3: Develop your Alien Character's Backstory and Present Situation

Build upon your alien character outline, by giving your character a backstory and present situation.

- **Backstory**
  - your character's name or designation
  - place of birth
  - race
  - language
  - religion
  - gender
  - education and intelligence level
  - social class and social skills
  - past occupations (of key importance; don't write a resume)
  - number of parents and siblings, and relationship with parents and siblings
  - health and any disabilities
  - any special physical abilities and mental talents

- **Present Situation**
  - character's viewpoint in the story
    Has the character's point of view changed? Will it change in the story?
  - age
  - sexuality
  - appearance
  - occupation
  - habits
  - fears or phobias

Exercise #3: Develop your Alien Character's Backstory and Present Situation (cont.)

- **Present Situation (cont.)**
  - marital status or love interest
    Did the love interest save the character's life or harm the character?
  - number of children (if any)
  - enemies
    How did your character make the enemies?
  - friends
    Did they save the character's life or harm the character?
  - pets or creature companions
    Did they save the character's life or harm the character?
  - political views
    How have circumstances changed or reinforced them?
  - things that excite the character
  - things that upset the character
  - things the character admires in other characters
  - things the character dislikes in other characters
  - What is the one thing your character would do anything to avoid? Why?
  - What is the one thing your character would do anything to acquire? Why?

Exercise #4: Reveal Your Alien Character's Character

Continue to develop your alien character's description and backstory, by describing these aspects of your character's psyche and mental state…

- Write 5-10 **factual** statements about your character.

- Write 5-10 **lies** about your character.

- Write 5-10 **quirky habits** or **flaws** about your character.

- Write 2-5 **contradictory traits** about your character.

  (Examples: your character is adventurous, but only during a full moon; your character is brilliant, but only after eating a certain substance; your character is decisive, but only when engaged in a military operation high in planetary orbit).

Exercise #5: Write a Short Poem in Your Alien Character's Voice

The poem can be in any format or length.

The goal is to present a dimension of your character that transcends outlines and descriptions. The poem can reveal the hopes and aspirations of your alien character in ways that descriptions cannot.

The poem shouldn't be in the alien character's language, *especially* if it's Klingon, unless you provide an English translation.

Selected Writing Resources

- **Orson Scott Card**, *Characters & Viewpoint*, Writer's Digest Books, 1988

  How to invent, construct, and animate vivid, credible characters and choose the best eyes through which to view the events of your short story or novel.

  - Inventing Characters
  - Constructing Characters
  - Performing Characters

- **Orson Scott Card**, *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Writer's Digest Books, 1990

  Story Construction

  - Finding a character for an idea, or developing ideas for a character to enact
  - Qualifications for the main character: Who hurts the most? Who has power and freedom to act?
  - Should the viewpoint character be the main character? How do you decide?
  - The MICE quotient: milieu, idea, character, event – knowing which is most important in your story will help you decide its proper shape

- **David Gerrold**, *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Writer's Digest Books, 2001

  - The Hero
  - Who Is This Person?
  - Building Aliens
  - Fantasy Worlds

- **J. N. Williamson**, editor, *How to Write tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Writer's Digest Books, 1987

  - One View: Creating Character in Fantasy and Horror Fiction (Steve Rasnic Tem)
  - "Oh, Just Call Me Cuthbert": The Naming Game (Thomas Millstead)
  - Creating Fantasy Folk (Ardath Mayhar)
  - Sexist Stereotypes and Archetypes: What to Do with Them/What the Writing Woman Can Hope For (Jeanette M. Hopper)

Selected Internet Resources

Character Generators

- **Characterize - Character Creator & Random Name Generator for Fantasy Names, Pirates, Aliens & More** – Alexander Winn
  https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/characterize-character-creator-random-name-generator/id706661890?mt=8
  Note: In-app purchases are necessary to access Fantasy and Science Fiction content.

- **Fantasy Name Generators: Alien Description Generator**
  http://www.fantasynamegenerators.com/alien-descriptions.php#.WL6wMhg-L1I

- **Seventh Sanctum: Being and Creature Generators**
  http://www.seventhsanctum.com/index-bein.php

- **Seventh Sanctum: Alien Race Generators**
  http://www.seventhsanctum.com/generate.php?Genname=alienrace

- **Alien Species Generator**
  http://www.scifiideas.com/alien-species-generator/

- **Fantasy & Sci-Fi Race Generator**
  http://www.springhole.net/writing_roleplaying_randomators/humanoid.htm

- **Character Generator** – WritingExercises.co.uk
  http://writingexercises.co.uk/character.php

- **Character Traits Generator** – WritingExercises.co.uk
  http://writingexercises.co.uk/random-character-traits-generator.php

Alien Characters

- **How To Create An Alien Species In 3 Stages** – Veronica Sicoe
  http://www.veronicasicoe.com/blog/2015/08/how-to-create-an-alien-species-in-3-stages/

- **13 Aspects About Aliens You Shouldn't Ignore** – Veronica Sicoe
  http://www.veronicasicoe.com/blog/2012/04/13-aspects-about-aliens-you-shouldnt-ignore/

- **13 More Aspects About Aliens That You Should Consider** – Veronica Sicoe
  http://www.veronicasicoe.com/blog/2012/10/13-more-aspects-about-aliens-that-you-should-consider/

- **So You Want To / Create Believable Aliens** – TV Tropes
  http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/SoYouWantTo/CreateBelievableAliens

- **So You Want To / Design an Alien Mind** – TV Tropes
  http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/SoYouWantTo/DesignAnAlienMind

- **Creating Believable Aliens** – Tina Morgan
  http://www.fictionfactor.com/articles/creatingaliens.html

- **Aliens and Faeries: Non-Human Characters Acting Badly** – Lee Masterson
  http://www.fictionfactor.com/articles/aliens.html

- **How Aliens Work** – Craig Freudenrich, PH.D.
  http://science.howstuffworks.com/space/aliens-ufos/alien-physiology3.htm

SFWA

- **You and Your Characters** by James Patrick Kelly
  http://www.sfwa.org/2005/01/you-and-your-characters/

Gotham Writers | Writer's Toolbox

- ### Character Questionnaire
  https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/character-questionnaire

  (See the "Gotham Character Questionnaire" and "Marcel Proust Character Questionnaire.")

Writing-World.com

- ### Fiction Writing Tips: Characters, Viewpoint, & Names
  http://www.writing-world.com/menus/characters.shtml

  Creating Characters Readers Will Love

  Character Tags and Tics - Victoria Grossack
  Creating Great Heroes and Heroines - Anne M. Marble
  Creating Memorable Characters - Lee Masterson
  Creating Villains People Love to Hate - Lee Masterson
  Do Werewolves Wear Shoes? Building Successful Horror Characters - Shaunna Privratsky
  Don't Treat Your Characters Like Puppets! - Anne M. Marble
  The Ethics of Tragedy: Plot Victims are People Too! - Paula Fleming
  Everybody Lies - Victoria Grossack
  Extending Your Character Range: Sex, Age and Other - Victoria Grossack
  Finding Your Characters - Mary Cook
  Handling a Cast of Thousands I: Getting to Know Your Characters - Will Greenway
  Handling a Cast of Thousands II: Your Story as Your Characters (and Readers) See It - Will Greenway
  Handling a Cast of Thousands III: Developing the Five-Act Scene - Will Greenway
  How Not to Create a Villain - Anne M. Marble
  Mentors in Your Masterpiece - Victoria Grossack
  Motivation - Hank Quense
  The Mystery of Character - Robert Wilson
  The Secrets of Characterization - Sigrid Macdonald
  A Study in Sidekicks - Victoria Grossack
  We All Need Someone To Love: Creating Characters Readers Will Care About - Victoria Grossack
  What Do Your Characters Want? (Part One) - Victoria Grossack
  What Do Your Characters Want? (Part Two): How to Use Characters' Goals to Move the Plot - Victoria Grossack
  What Type Is Your Character? - Paula Fleming
  What's My Line? Character Professions in the Romance - Anne M. Marble

  Character Naming

  In the Name of Love... Finding the Right Names for Your Characters - Desmond Lindo
  The Name Game - John Robert Marlow
  Name That Character! - Anne M. Marble
  A Rose by Any Other Name... - Devyani Borade
  What's in a Name? - Moira Allen
  What's In a Name? - Victoria Grossack

  Establishing Viewpoint

  Establishing the Right Point of View: How to Avoid "Stepping Out of Character" - Marg Gilks
  Headhopping, Authorial Intrusion, and Shocked Expressions - Anne Marble
  My Point of View on Point of View (Part One) - Victoria Grossack
  My Point of View on Point of View (Part Two) - Victoria Grossack
  Viewpoint, Perspective and Time - Will Greenway

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