ALIENS IN THE CAMPAIGN

Alien life in a space campaign can fill a vast number of roles. The social and political categories for alien species noted in Chapter 1 are pretty much independent of biology – it doesn't usually matter if the dominant species are carbon-based or silicon-based, aquatic or aerial.

From a *dramatic* standpoint, however, alien beings can fit into four categories, and their biology and appearance do affect which one they belong to. In science-fiction stories and films, alien beings seem to naturally clump into types: people, beasts, things, and monsters.

PEOPLE

Aliens as people are probably the most common in modern science fiction. They don't have to *look* like humans – Poul Anderson created many fascinating alien "people" with very unusual shapes – but a humanoid appearance does make it easier to view them as "folks like us." People-aliens have understandable motives and rational goals. If they are in conflict with humans, the fight is likely to be about something like resources or living space.

They don't have to act exactly like Earth humans, though. Often people-aliens have one or more human traits cranked up to an inhuman degree. Some of these caricature traits are so common in fiction as to be standard types: the warrior Race, the mystics, the ultra-rationalists. Their societies can also parody an aspect of modern human life.

Some readers have criticized people-aliens as being just "humans in funny suits" but others like the idea that a mind is a mind no matter what body it wears. The issue will no doubt remain in dispute until humans actually meet aliens and find out.

BEASTS

Beast aliens make use of archetypes drawn from human perceptions of Earthly animals. They can fit many of the same roles as people-type aliens, but their behavior and culture reflect their animal models. If people aliens tap into ancient travelers' tales about exotic lands, beasts come from fairy tales and fables about talking animals. Larry Niven's Kzinti are beast aliens based on Terran cats. Genetically modified animals provide a rigorously "hard SF" way to use beast archetypes even in a game universe without any aliens at all.

Beasts are very effective because they come with a ready-made and fairly consistent set of assumptions. Eagles are fierce and solitary, so eagle-like aliens make good "proud warrior" cultures. Some of those assumptions about the relationship between ecological role and personality inform the alien-design rules in this chapter.

Game Masters can also make use of the mythical and legendary associations of Earth animals when creating beast aliens. Snakes aren't evil, but because they have long been used as icons of evil in many Terran mythologies, a civilization of serpent-men aliens make natural campaign villains. Lions aren't particularly noble, but their association with royalty make lion-aliens good candidates for honorable aristocrats.

THINGS

"Happy b-b-birthday, you thing from another world, you."
– Porky Pig, **Duck Dodgers in the 24 1/2th Century**

The most alien aliens are perceived as "things" – icky and creepy, possibly not even really alive. They draw on our nearly reflexive reactions to things that sting and bite or spread decay. For a long time SF used alien things simply as monsters, as when H.G. Wells used octopuses as the model for his bloodsucking Martian invaders of Earth. But things don't have to be automatically hostile; they may simply be mysterious and incomprehensible to humans. Things are intrinsically *alien*. If humans ever learn how they think, things can turn into funny-looking people.

While things often use "creepy-crawly" animals like spiders and squids for a model, they can also take on attributes of inanimate or non-living things. Plasma-beings that look like living flames are things, as are cyborg races that have turned themselves into machines.

MONSTERS

Aliens as monsters are probably the oldest role of all – consider Grendel in *Beowulf* or the gorgons of Greek myth. They are menaces, pure and simple. Recent films like the *Aliens* series show the trope is alive and well.

Monsters may or may not be intelligent. If they are, their cleverness only adds to the threat they present. The whole point of a monster is that it's dangerous. If the monster can be negotiated with or placated, it ceases to be a monster and turns into some other kind of alien. The process of "reclassifying" monsters is an old and highly useful science-fiction plot.

Purely animal monsters may be "only" dangerous predators, or may have some other reason for hunting or attacking the heroes. Again, discovering the reason behind an animal monster makes a good adventure. Sometimes, though, a monster is just a monster.

In appearance monsters may be terrifying "things," or beasts drawing on monstrous archetypes like Terran wolves, or deceptively human-seeming "people" with a deadly secret nature. In cinematic settings, monsters may even look like demons or undead.

WORKING BACKWARD

The bulk of this chapter is concerned with how to create realistic alien species from scratch. There are even tables for randomly generating things like ecological niches and mating styles. Given that humans won't be able to choose or predict what kind of creatures we meet out there, random creation or just doing what sounds cool is a reasonable and even realistic way to create aliens.