

THE 3 BEST SHORTCUTS WHEN YOU CREATE ALIENS

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It can be hard coming up with interesting and believable aliens for scenarios. On occasion you will want to exploit the old clichés: cat-like hunters, wolf-like packs always obeying their leader – or slimy green heaps covered in slithering tentacles. But that's not always going to work. Some settings will need new types of life forms to spark an interest with players.

From working on my game *M-SPACE*, I have found a few simple shortcuts for alien creation. When trying to come up with strange life forms, you often need to rewire your creativity a bit to force it into new paths. Here are three procedures you can try next time you need an alien species.

1. Exploit the biome

Creating aliens without a context is like stumbling forward in a dark room. You have nothing to guide your decisions when taking the next step forward. A *biome* is crucial as a backdrop for lifeforms; they quite literally grow out of it. The biome can be as simple as "temperate forest" or something much more exotic, like "semi-frozen methane flooding lime caves every second week under the influence of the third moon". Either way, start small: imagine materializing there for a moment, taking in not more than you can perceive from a single viewpoint. (If it feels like an overwhelming task, take a biome you are familiar with and change only one or two things).

Now, start with any of the following questions: How does an animal get food here? How does it find protection; from weather, outer forces and predators? How can it offer safety for its cubs or eggs (or however it reproduces)? The answers you come up with will be the first attributes for your new alien species. With three or four of these attributes, ruthlessly start to shape the creature around them. The rest of the species' features will be optimized for these basic attributes to work at their best.

Now, you may wonder, what if it's an intelligent species building high-tech civilizations? I recommend starting the same way as above and then, in your mind's eye, fast forward to the roots of civilization. How can simple technology make life easier for these individuals and what materials are they likely to exploit first? And how can those simple innovations, thousands of years later, be developed into complex mechanical, electronic or digital objects?

Use the alien's biome to your advantage. Many of the answers you need will be found there.



2. Start with a weakness

This method is one of my favorites. It boils down to one simple question: how can this being survive despite its weaknesses?

Sloths are good examples here on Earth. How come they have thrived for thousands of years, despite being exceptionally slow, and additionally almost blind and deaf? In this case, there seems to be several key advantages playing in the sloth's favor: first of all, they spend almost all of their time in trees, where predators have a hard time reaching them. Second, the big claws they use for hanging are surprisingly effective when defending themselves. And finally, their fur is colonized not only by algae tinting them green, but also by several insect species, together providing them with quite a good camouflage among the foliage.

As you can see, this quickly generated a stack of attributes (climbing, natural weapon, camouflage) for a species of slow tree-dwellers. The same process can be used from scratch to create aliens.

For the *M-SPACE setting book* coming out in a few months, I have created an extremely fragile species, with bodies made of a paper-like material (almost like a hornet nest). What would make a species like this survive through evolution? I decided upon two major factors. First, fragility is a universal attribute to all life forms on the planet. This was made possible by a kindly world; even the weather is nice and sweet there. Second, full body regeneration has occurred for this particular species sometime during evolution. Their heads are slightly sturdier, and as long as it is intact, it can be transplanted to an empty paper body. (Fragility also has wide implications for society, but I will have to save that topic for some other time).

Weaknesses are great tools. They force you to think in new ways and often result in unexpected combinations. Just what is needed for otherworldly creations.

3. Create a class of lifeforms

Have you noticed how similar many mammals on Earth are? Most are left-right symmetrical, have four arms/legs, sense organs are placed roughly the same way on our heads, and so on. Astrobiologists tell us that Universal similarities like these are likely to appear on other planets as well; evolution will probably work much the same way wherever we go.

This is the idea behind the concept of *Life Form Universals* in *M-SPACE*. Here, before you start developing an alien, you define a few universal features most creatures share on a planet. If you have the Universal traits

spherical, exoskeleton and 100+ arms, these traits will dominate all fauna of the planet.

In this case, there can for example be big spheres preying on smaller ones; spheres floating on the seas, exhaling all air to submerge themselves for protection; herds of spheres grazing algae from rocks; small and quick spheres inventing a wheel-like running technique on their multitude of arms, and so on. With Universals defined, you just need to create some varieties to fill a few ecological niches. And with every niche, the creature will have adapted more or less, deviating from the Universals – just like here on Earth. Size will vary, as well as shape and surface attributes. What they feed on will be highly diverse, thus

shaping their behaviour, communication, limbs used for fine manipulation and so on.

Strangely enough, developing several creatures at the same time can be quicker than creating just one. The way they interlock, yet carving out unique niches, tend to drive creativity forward.

There is one big problem with alien creation: as we have never encountered any extraterrestrials, we have no way of knowing what they are like. Our creations are inevitably tied by the way earthly life forms look, function and behave. But by short-circuiting our creativity a bit, we can bypass the worst clichés. And hopefully gain some valuable insights on what it means to be a human in the process.

