

What is that thing?

by Tim Mikkelsen

Introduction

In my more hopeful moments of reflection, I honestly believe that we will become a space faring society and race. I am ready to admit that the space lanes will be sparse. (I don't expect to be around, sadly, for either humanity's bursting onto the stellar scene or for first contact.) However, this does not stop me from speculating on what and whom we are going to run into out in space.

Almost all current popular science fiction in print, film, computer game and television has human kind interacting with aliens of one kind or another. Some of the authors have come up with some very interesting possibilities. However, much of the alien landscape is littered with the conceptual equivalent of men and women in monster suits.

The point of this little article is to try to think systematically about what kind of aliens we might actually run into as we achieve space travel. More specifically, I am not examining the entire universe (literally and conceptually) of possible life-forms or sentient life-forms. I want to think about sentient, space-faring aliens.

Of course, this endeavor is undertaken with the knowledge of its intrinsic limitations. I am, in spite of various nasty comments to the contrary, human. I don't expect to 'get it right.' What I want to accomplish is to start thinking about the domain of aliens and come up with a way to think about them.

Taxonomy

So, how do you examine a race of aliens? What are the key characteristics that matter? One approach is to look at the characteristics of:

- Physical nature
- Societal structure
- Species characteristics
- Individual aspects
- Societal aspects (behavioral)
- Environmental (planetary)
- Environmental (celestial)

Possible characteristics

The following are possible reasons why the alien race would become spacefaring:

relating to the species:

- Overly reproductive
- Too long-lived
- Risk averse
- Risk takers
- Aggressive or combative
- Crazy (what does this mean?)
- Curiosity
- Nurturing (protective)

relating to individuals:

- Ego-centric
- Risk averse
- Risk takers
- Aggressive or combative
- Paranoid
- Bored
- Over-achievers
- Religious
- Curiosity

relating to the society:

- Leadership
- Ethno-centric
- Risk averse
- Risk takers
- Aggressive or combative
- Economics
- Paranoid
- Bored
- Over-achievers
- Religious
- Curiosity

The risk averse race would become space-faring to know what is 'out there' out of concern for the risks it presents. They may also do this if they have a very long-term view (i.e. suns eventually

fail). They would probably send out misfits or robots.

relating to the planetary environment:

- Bad environment (their fault)
- Bad environment (other)
- Out of resources
- Displaced by another race
- Displaced by environment

relating to the celestial environment:

- Bad celestial environment

relating to an event:

- Technological event
- Celestial event
- Sociological
- Temporal (what does this mean?)
- Accidental
- Religious

relating to other aspects:

- Uplifted by another race (accident)
- Uplifted by another race (intentional)
- Displaced by another race (accident)
- Displaced by another race (intentional)
- Random
- Probabilistic
- Physics of the celestial environment
- Chemistry of the planet

Examples

Some examples are:

Risk averse:	Pierson's puppeteers (Niven)
Uplifted:	(Brin)
Aggressive:	Klingons (Roddenberry)
Nurturing:	Pak protector (Niven)