

ALIEN Short Essays: Contents

{button 1,JI('Introduction')} [Introduction](#)
{button 2,JI('Fun')} [Fun and Death With the ALIEN](#)
{button 3,JI('Oscar')} [Space Jockey and Oscar](#)
{button 4,JI('Philosophy')} [Theme Design Philosophy](#)

ALIEN Short Essays: Introduction

ALIEN Commemoration -- A concept desktop theme!

This help file contains three essays about what the film ALIEN was all about: Science fiction and horror! I wanted to suggest these elements in a Windows desktop theme as a tribute to one of the best sci-fi horror genre films ever made. Sci-fi horror makes for an interesting desktop. Hopefully ALIEN Commemoration will capture the charm of the original film for you. Enjoy the experience!

-- Tony Varnas

[Next](#)

ALIEN Short Essays: Fun and Death With the ALIEN

Although James Cameron's sequel *Aliens* is arguably a better film, the original ALIEN movie is unquestionably a classic in the science fiction/horror tradition. And for good reason: skillfully constructed with a devilish mixture of gothic horror and sci-fi tech, ALIEN became an instant box-office hit in the summer of 1979. Outer space had never been portrayed like this! The world of the spaceship Nostromo and of the Weyland-Yutani corporation was undeniably dismal. The addition of a cold-blooded ALIEN made the place literally mortifying. To audiences accustomed with the feel-good fantasies of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, the ALIEN was deliciously different.

Thanks mainly to the talents of director Ridley Scott (also of *Blade Runner* fame), and to the eerie "bio-mechanoid" art of H.R.Giger, the original ALIEN movie gave us a new and ghastly world. It was, foremost, an alien world, and it worked beautifully with our natural instincts. When something is "alien" it is, after all, strange. And strange is frightening. And when something is both strange and dangerous... well, it can be positively terrifying.

However in an odd sort of way, the movie was never really "new" at all! When we looked beyond the clever set designs we could see all the 1950's sci-fi thrillers that inspired the ALIEN. It was all there if we searched deeply enough: the spooky world of *Forbidden Planet*, the solitary rampage of *The Thing*, the parasitic life-cycle of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In retrospect we had seen it all before; the ALIEN was nothing more than a retread of familiar sci-fi tales.

But all this didn't matter: the audiences loved the film anyway. ALIEN was no safe fairy-tale. It was a story about a monster that went bump in the night -- a demon that lurked in the darkness and prowled for victims to kill. It was, in short, a thrilling nightmare.

Outer space, our new fantasy realm, would be changed forever. Space was no longer just "the final frontier"; the ALIEN had made it a deadly place...

...a place where no one could hear you scream.

[Next](#)

ALIEN Short Essays: Space Jockey and Oscar

ALIEN is named for the predatory creature that kills most of the Nostromo crew members. But this title is somewhat misleading. The film actually featured another -- and altogether benign -- alien being: that of the dead astronaut pilot whose distress beacon the crew of the Nostromo go to investigate. Avid ALIEN fans have nicknamed this second alien as the "Space Jockey." The scenes containing the "Space Jockey" are some of the most memorable from the movie; befittingly, his picture also makes for the wallpaper artwork of the ALIEN Commemoration desktop theme.

The real story of the "Space Jockey" is as interesting as the film itself. He was created by Hans Ruedi (H.R.) Giger -- a Swiss artist renown for his macabre occult / sexual / technological imagery. In early 1978, Mr.Giger was commissioned to supply illustrations and models for the upcoming film project. Working with only a preliminary screenplay, Giger produced over thirty working paintings for director Ridley Scott and 20th-Century Fox, the film's studio backer. With their approval, set and model construction was begun later that year at the Shepperton and Bray studios in south London, England.

A full-sized 10-foot model of the "Space Jockey" was first sculptured in clay and transferred to a polyester shell supported by a wooden frame. To make the model appear even larger on film, Ridley Scott resorted to some clever visual chicanery: he dressed three children in diminutive 4-foot tall astronaut suits and filmed them in front of the model. Thus the "Space Jockey" was made to appear as a towering figure with a height of over 15-feet. (Film fact: two of the diminutive astronauts were actually Scott's own children!)

ALIEN made it's official world release on May 12, 1979 in Graumann's Egyptian Theater on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard. For the gala event, the huge "Space Jockey" model was flown from England and displayed in front of the cinema. It made for an impressive sight. Unfortunately tragedy struck when the model was later destroyed in an arsonist's attack.

However the "Space Jockey" wasn't forgotten. As a testament to his vision and talent, H.R.Giger was nominated for an Oscar, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's highest award for excellence. Indeed, on April 14, 1980, the artist won the Academy Award for "Best Achievement for Visual Effects" for his work in ALIEN. This Oscar was due, in no small part, to his creation of the "Space Jockey."

[Next](#)

ALIEN Short Essays: Theme Design Philosophy

In the spirit of the original ALIEN film, I've tried to recreate the futuristic feel and strangeness of the Scott/Giger masterpiece. I wanted to capture the two fundamental elements of any genre film like ALIEN: sci-fi and horror.

Ok, first things first...

Sci-fi.

The *sine qua non* of any sci-fi story is futuristic technology. In keeping with this spirit, I've emphasized a "techy" (technological) flavor to desktop elements. The ALIEN Extended font was created to suggest this quality. Also, extensive mechanical / electronic sound effects were used for many of the routine computer functions such as menu commands, program terminations etc. I wanted the desktop to "hum" and "clack" with an eerie mechanical sound.

The system icons are also appropriately "techy". The recycle bin looks as if it should belong on the Nostromo. For an added treat: empty the recycle bin and listen as the ALIEN gets flushed out into space!

Horror.

Ok, to be honest, it's rather difficult to make any computer terrifying. This is especially true of a *personal* computer. Let's face it: Windows is about as spooky as a fax machine (unless, of course, you have one of those "newbie" aversion phobias). I suppose the only truly terrifying thing that happens with computer use is lost data.

In any event, horror can be suggested by making the theme spooky. I made most elements within the desktop rather dark. Nothing cute here! No funny icons or wisecracking sound bytes. Also, I've relied on H.R.Giger's art since it has a naturally foreboding quality. For the all-important background wallpaper I've used Giger's famous painting of the dead astronaut pilot. (see the previous essay: [Space Jockey and Oscar](#)). This image is one of the most haunting and memorable scenes of the film. I think it works well.

Of course, sound effects really help in setting the spooky mood of this theme. As a tribute to all horror films, ALIEN Commemoration goes bump in the night. Be forewarned: this can be a noisy desktop. Error sounds are especially harsh and jarring. Hopefully they'll give you a good-natured startle!

And a good startle is what sci-fi horror films are all about...

-- Tony Varnas

