

From Outer Space and Down Rabbit Holes

Fry's Electronics takes a whimsical approach to store decor

BY MIKE WINDER

BIG-BOX RETAIL CHAIN FRY'S ELECTRONICS began in Silicon Valley in 1985 and caters to folks unafraid of soldering a microchip or getting tangled in Ethernet cords.

But, beyond sporting the biggest selection of transformers, plug adapters, and coaxial cables this side of Akihabara, Fry's is also renowned for its elaborately themed stores.

Sausalito-based designer Eric Christensen has been creating Fry's fanciful environments for the past 19 years. Often receiving from franchise co-owner John Fry only a few words as a starting point, Christensen decides how best to bring a theme to life. It's work that has taken him around the world, from Egypt to Machu Picchu.

"I always take a thousand pictures," Christensen says. "I get inspiration and see how I can best fit what I see in the outside world into the design."

Both Fry's locations in the San Fernando Valley – the 100,000-square-foot Burbank store, built in 1996, and the 115,000-square-foot Woodland Hills store, built in 1995 – feature fantastic imagery for customers to gaze upon.

John Fry decided Burbank's proximity to the motion picture industry lent itself particularly well to a 1950s science-fiction B-movie theme. When it came time for Christensen to conduct his research, the designer went to a previous employer for help.

"I went out to George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, which I had worked on and designed for a number of years. I went to the library and checked out

a bunch of science-fiction movies from his collection," Christensen says.

Many decorations in the store pay homage to the *Mars Attacks* trading-card series from 1962 that spoofed alien-invasion films. Christensen was introduced to the cards by Chris Walas, who crafted the makeup effects for director David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Naked Lunch*. Walas also worked with Christensen on the "Alice in Wonderland" Fry's store in Woodland Hills.

At the Burbank location, elements include a downed UFO protruding from the exterior of the building. Inside, sinister green aliens – clad in bulbous spacesuits and brandishing futuristic pistols – crawl out of the saucer's wreckage and try to escape along the store's ventilation shafts.

You'll also see scrambling fighter jets, gutted military vehicles, and three 30-foot-long ants reminiscent of the monsters in *Them!*, the 1954 creature feature in which giant mutant ants burrow beneath the Los Angeles River. Disgruntled customers in line for the repairs department may empathize with an ant overhead, perpetually stung as it sits caught between two high-voltage towers.

The store's centerpiece is Gort, the silver humanoid robot from the 1951 anti-nuclear cult classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Ironically, in that film, as a way of warning humanity not to continue down a dangerous technological path, the menacing robot momentarily switches off all electric equipment throughout the world. (Time to pick



ERIC GUNRUD

up a surge protector?)

If the Burbank experience sounds too apocalyptic, gadget freaks might consider falling down the rabbit hole in Woodland Hills. There, 15-foot-tall sculptures are on display, based on John Tenniel's illustrations for Lewis Carroll's storybook classic. Alice, the White Rabbit, the Caterpillar, and the Cheshire Cat have all been invited to the party, as well as lesser known characters the Walrus, the Carpenter, the Gryphon, and the Mock Turtle.

Large faux books with excerpts from Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition* hang next to many of the creations, lending a surprisingly scholarly tone to the experience. Consider, for example, the text for the Jabberwocky display: "British astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington has likened the abstract syntactical structure of Carroll's poem to the modern branch of mathematics known as group theory."

"Explanations take such a dreadful time," the Gryphon might argue, but this curious (and curiouser) bit of erudition is worth breaking down. Beyond writing children's classics, Carroll was also a talented mathematician. And long before John Fry founded Fry's Electronics, he studied mathematics at Santa Clara University. Which leads us to Christensen's current project: designing a reproduction of the Alhambra – a Moorish castle located in Granada, Spain – in Morgan Hill, just north of Gilroy, as a new facility for Fry's American Institute of Mathematics. ★