

Star Merchant
Futuristic Trade Simulation Game
by
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1.0 Introduction

Star Merchant was a game I had written and submitted to Creative Computing in June of 1980. It was accepted and appeared in their August 1981 issue. It was originally written in H.P. BASIC on an HP-1000 we had at work. In the January 1982 issue, someone wrote a letter to the magazine pointing out that the trade tables I was using in this game originated with Game Designer's Workshop game, *Traveller*. They said they were disappointed that I had not given those folk's credit. The editor added a comment saying they were disappointed too. That was certainly embarrassing. It has been a long time since I've played *Traveller*, but according to Wiki, it is still being marketed.

A year or so later, Creative Computing wrote me a letter stating they were interested in putting this game in a book they were planning and said they would pay me for an updated article. I had an updated version running on my TRS-80 Model 1 and it included all sorts of new features. I mailed them the updated article and game. I never heard back from them.

Another year or so went by and while browsing at a bookstore in the mall, I saw the book, *Big Computer Games* by David Ahl. The table of contents had my game listed. Needless to say, I bought the book and then made a few phone calls. I even tried talking to David Ahl directly, but he was on vacation or something. The people I talked to wanted to know if I could send them a copy of the letter where they offered to pay me. I did and I soon received a check from them. It wasn't that much. You can find the copy of the article as it appeared in *Big Computer Games* at:

<https://www.atariarchives.org/bigcomputergames/showpage.php?page=57>

If you read the article in the book, you will find there are features that are described that are not in software listing that was included. Creative Computing used my updated article but went back to the game as it appeared in the August 81 issue. They had someone convert it from H.P. BASIC to Microsoft BASIC creating a mismatch between the updated article and the game. Oh well. At least in the updated article, I acknowledged Game Designer's Workshop for using their trade tables.

The next time I encountered this game was couple of decades later when out of boredom, I searched for it on-line. To my surprise, I found it. It had been converted to c. It can still be found at:

<https://github.com/cymonsgames/CymonsGames/tree/master/starmerchant/starmerchant>

I downloaded this game and played it a few times. It was a good conversion.

I retired in August 2020 from Boeing where I had worked as a software test engineer on the International Space Station. As a retired engineer, I have been spending a lot of time revisiting old projects. One of these projects

required a copy of PC-BASIC. The site where I downloaded this program had links to a site with many old BASIC games. In this link, I once again found the game, Star Merchant. I traded a few emails with the owner of this site. He summarized our conversation on his web site. You can find Star Merchant described at: <https://peyre.x10.mx/GWBASIC/>. You may have to scroll down a bit, but it is there (or at least was there at time of this writing.)

I also found a few other links talking about this game:

<http://www.lordkilgore.com/star-merchant>

And here is a link for the Atari 400/800 version:

http://www.atarimania.com/game-atari-400-800-xl-xe-star-merchant_4991.html

I recently recovered my NEC PC-8201A from storage. It had been dormant for many years and the batteries were shot. I replaced the NiCad batteries with NiMH and after a week or so, it was operational. When it looked like the NEC was dead, I purchased a TRS-80 Model 100 from eBay. It is like the NEC but there are some differences and limitations that annoy me. Overall, I prefer the NEC.

I downloaded the BASIC version of Star Merchant and hosted it on the NEC PC-8201A. It has been tested on both the NEC and the TRS-80 Model 100. It was nearly identical to the *Big Computer Games* version except for a minor typo and a modification to lessen the occurrence of crew strikes. The other major change was to add the "Press Any Key" message to accommodate the laptop displays. I combined a few lines to reduce memory and learned you gain 4 bytes for every line you combine.

The information that follows was adapted from the original article that I submitted to Creative Computing. It is still applicable.

2.0 Historical Background.

Early in the 26th century the SOXFTL drive was developed. This drive, when professionally installed on a spaceship, would cause a controlled warping of space enabling the spaceship to travel at fifty times faster than light (50XFTL).

Massive colonization of the nearby stars took place in the following two centuries due to the crowded conditions on inhabitable planets of the solar system and the development of this drive.

By the mid-29th century large orbiting space stations (starports) were constructed at the ten most populated star systems. These starports had facilities for docking and refueling starships as well as massive cargo storage capability.

The construction of these starports was closely paralleled by a simplification of starship design. With the advent of starports it was no longer necessary for a starship to land on a planet. This eliminated the need for atmospheric streamlining as well as the large reaction engines required to lift the starship from the planetary surface, thus increasing the cargo hold of starships substantially.

The cargos which will be available for purchase at any starport is difficult to predict since most of these cargos did not originate at that star system but were brought there by other merchant starships. Coordination of trade

routes to guarantee cargo availability at a starport had never occurred due to the independent nature of the star merchants and the slow communication between the star systems.

As the trade developed between the starports, each of the starports was assigned a trade classification. Although the trade classification is useless in determining which cargos might be available for purchase, it is extremely useful in predicting a cargo's price.

3.0 Game Description.

When you play Star Merchant you will find yourself as commander of a merchant starship. Your goal is to make enough money by trading cargos to stay in business and regain your initial investment for the lease of the starship. There are ten different starports where trade is conducted and thirty-six different types of cargos which may be traded. A brief set of instructions for the game will be displayed (if desired) when the program is run.

The different types of cargos range from agricultural produce and raw materials to industrial produced items such as weapons and machinery. The price these cargos will be trading at is dependent upon the trade classification of the starport where the item is being traded. For example: farm machinery might bring top dollar at a starport with an agricultural trade class, whereas the price of grain there will probably be very low.

The starport names, distances and directions listed for command 5 (LIST STARPORTS) were taken from the actual names, distances, and direction of some of the stars closest to Earth. The distance and direction will not always be completely accurate since for this game, the stars are represented on two dimensions as opposed to the three dimensions of actual space. This made displaying a star map much easier to implement. (This version does not include that feature.)

Ship expenses must be paid every time a new starport is reached. If your account becomes negative after paying these expenses, you must sell enough cargo to make it positive before you can leave the starport. If you do not have enough cargo to do this, you are out of business and the game ends.

The expenses which must be paid consist of a docking fee, fuel expenses, and crew salary. The docking fee will always be 50,000 credits at each starport. The fuel expenses are directly proportional to the distance traveled from the last starport. The cost of fuel per lightyear is 100,000 credits. The crew's salary is based on an annual salary of 500,000 credits and the amount of ship time that has passed since when the crew was last paid.

Ship time increases .02 years (approximately a week) for each lightyear traveled and .003 years (approximately a day) for each cargo transaction.

As your fortune grows, the probability that the crew will go on strike for a higher salary increases. When a strike occurs, the crew presents their salary demands and you are requested to present a counteroffer. The probability that your counteroffer will be accepted depends upon the amount that you had offered and the number of counteroffers that were previously rejected. Once the crew has rejected ten of your counteroffers, they will only accept their original salary demands or higher. For this reason, an early strike settlement is desirable. I have just added a new feature that allows you to counteroffer with an amount less than their current salary.

The lease on your ship will expire after two years of ship time. When this occurs you will be asked to renew your lease if you have enough money. It will cost 2,000,000 credits for another two-year lease. Should you decide not to renew your lease or if you do not have enough money for lease renewal, the game will end with the game results being displayed.