An Introduction to Traveller

PART 1: PLAYERS AND CHARACTERS

BY ANDY SLACK

Traveller is a game in which each player takes the role of a single adventurer in a science fiction setting. This 'character' has certain skills and characteristics predetermined by dice and decisions taken by the player creating him, representing prior experience. He then, in the company of a group of heroes and heroines controlled by other players, sets out to achieve his goals by acquiring money and power. The game referee describes to the players the beings and environments their characters encounter, and based on their descriptions of their responses and the rules booklets he adjudicates what happens to the characters.

The game seems to run best with a referee and two to four players, but more are possible. There is no real winner or loser in the conventional sense; the referee's job is to mediate and maintain fair play, and to create and describe the game universe; the players choose their own aims, but regardless of whether they achieve them or not, or whether their aims are conflicting and thus result in competition between characters, the point of the game is to enjoy playing.

There are two terms which should be defined with regard to the game; scenario and campaign. A scenario is a single adventure, spread over one or more gaming sessions, in which the characters strive to attain a given objective. Typically, a powerful character controlled by the referee will approach the player-characters and offer them a reward if they will perform a task or obtain an item for him. The band or party of adventurers then attempts this, and must overcome difficulties to succeed. Success brings a reward, typically money, with which the characters can improve their game lives in whatever way appeals to them.

However, as the players grow attached to their characters, and the referee tries to minimise his own work by retaining common elements from scenario to scenario, a resulting sequence of linked scenarios develop which is referred to as a campaign.

Basically, there are three main ways of getting involved in a game.

First, ask the staff in your local gaming shop if they know of a club or any other players; they may have a notice-board for this very purpose. If not, try asking to put up your own notice.

Second, try the nearest university. Most universities have either a *D&D* or wargames club, frequently with some *Traveller* gamers attached. There are also scattered groups of players unconnected to any club, or connected to SF or fantasy clubs. Watch the notice-boards and the university paper or diary or the students' union handbook. Many secondary schools now have groups of role-playing gamers too, so you may prefer to try them instead.

Third, try the magazines. These often have a small ads page where gamers are trying to get in touch with each other; you may find a fellow player this way, or you may decide to run your own ad. Try asking around among your friends, or at school or work, and sooner or later you will find someone else who plays. Attend a convention and try to find someone there who lives reasonably near to you — Dragonmeet seems to be the best for this.

The last resort is to buy the game and recruit your family and friends. This is not the best way, obviously, as you have to start as the referee, and therefore you don't really know what it's like to be a player; your games may suffer because of that. If you already play another role-playing game, that's good enough. Much experience of playing and refereeing is transferable from game to game.

Notes to the Player

The referee puts a lot of work into setting the game up, so be nice to him. Don't expect him to know everything or have everything already worked out; if you know better than he in a specific instance, ask him to take that into consideration, but remember always that he has the final word in terms of how the game is played. If you don't like the way he plays, go somewhere else or start your own game.

Bear in mind that the referee may well not be telling you everything that's going on. If he says something that sounds unreasonable, he may be taking something else into account that your character couldn't observe or wouldn't know.

It's not necessary to know the rules to enjoy the game; that's what the referee is for. However, the more you know the better. You should be familiar with the effects and abilities of your skills above all, and secondly with the capabilities of your weapons and equipment. There are two main reasons for this; to know your character's limitations, so that you won't put him needlessly at risk and to know what he *can* do, which may save your game life or give you ideas as to his personality, or goals, and will certainly help you to plan your approach to problems.

You should be familiar with the combat rules, but that comes with practice; you ought to bring or borrow a pair of six-sided dice (d6) as whatever you do, in combat or otherwise, will require d6, usually in pairs (2d6). If in doubt, do whatever you feel would be reasonable for a person in that situation; a good referee will allow such things even in the areas where the rules seem to disallow them. Remember that the rules are not the important thing; they are a tool, a means to an end, a way of ensuring that everyone agrees on what is possible and what the chances of given actions succeeding are.

It is worth learning hexadecimal notation as suggested and keeping them in the standard order of the Universal Personality Profile, firstly because it makes the information instantly accessible to you and secondly because almost everyone else playing does it that way. Then there are skills; note each, with the character's level of expertise. Until you learn your way around it keep notes of what they allow you to do and what modifiers they allow on your dice rolls.

Weapons and armour — the best combination for armour is still cloth armour worn over a suit of reflec. Battle dress or combat armour are better defences, but you may not have the Vacc Suit skill required to operate them, or be able to afford them and in any case they are frequently illegal. Further, think in character; would you *really* go out for a pint at the starport bar dressed like an Imperial Stormtrooper from *Star Wars*? Would you expect to be treated like a normal human being? What about the smell and the sweaty heat inside? Cloth and reflec you can usually pass off as normal outdoor clothing for the wilderness if you have a kind referee. It may be worth buying several different kinds and writing some standing orders on your character record about what you are wearing under which circumstances.

Be organised about your weapons. Take into account the likely law and tech levels you will operate under — ask the referee while equipping yourself what limits these cause. Choose your weapon skills, and your weapons, after thinking carefully about your character's personality, and try to pick ones for which your strength or dexterity give you a bonus as well as the one which will deal the most damage. Three dice of damage is all you need, because if you time it right you will only need one shot or blow that connects to disable an opponent. It is best to pick a longarm such as a rifle, submachinegun or shotgun, a pistol, and a blade weapon of some sort. Favourites vary from player to player — if *Mercenary, Book 4* is available people favour gauss rifles and snub pistols heavily; SMGs and shotguns are often favoured for their high hit probability and usefulness in close-quarter fighting such as board actions; the blade and the cutlass are probably the best blade weapons for the average character.

Once you have the weapons, note down your bonuses or penalties to hit in normal and weakened attacks. Note what type of ammo they have, how much of it there is, how much you use in each attack mode, what damage it does, and what else you can do with them — are there telescopic sights, can it fire grenades, can you use it as a club? Note also your effectiveness in brawling and with clubs, daggers and cudgels, since these are almost always to hand. Being organised saves your time and the referee's, so that you can all get on with the game.

Equipment — if you can afford it, buy tool kits, medical kits and so on for whatever skills you have, eg if your character has Electronics, get him electronic tools. Note down what the tools let you do, what they cost and weigh, and so on. Keep track of

how much weight your character is carrying, and have some idea about which order you'll abandon it in if you need to move fast. If you expect to be travelling in space, get a vacc suit. Even without the skill, it vastly improves your chances of survival.

You must also keep track of your character's finances and his current health. Successful attacks will reduce, temporarily, your character's strength, dexterity and endurance. Leave room to note these reductions, find out about the wounding rules so that you can allocate damage sensibly, and keep track of what state your character is in.

Characterisation

First we need to generate the character. There are six characteristics; each is rolled for with 2d6 (invariably written in the *Traveller* rules as 2D since *Traveller* only uses six-siders, and therefore need not specify how many sides there are). What do they mean?

Strength. How much physical power you can exert — how much weight you can lift, how hard you can push; things like that. A high strength allows you to wield blade weapons easily, and batter down an enemy's defences with them; thus you get bonuses with blade weapons for a good strength roll. It is also sometimes used as a very rough measure of size and weight for the character. High strength is advantageous if you want your character's prior experience to be in space marines or space scouts. A very low strength will reduce your ability in blade or hand-to-hand combat, since you find it harder to overpower your opponent, and some of the larger weapons are just too heavy for you.

Dexterity. Covers hand-eye co-ordination, ability to throw accurately, agility, reaction speed, and general quickness and cleverness of hand. A high dexterity allows you to point guns accurately and follow moving targets smoothly, so it gains you bonuses on attacks with guns. Conversely, a low dexterity give penalties on such attacks — perhaps your hand shakes too much or you cannot react quickly enough to shoot at a briefly-exposed and evading target. A good dexterity is useful for those characters intending to serve in the army, but is by no means essential for any character — until the bullets start flying.

Endurance. Combines physical fitness and will power. Broadly speaking, if strength governs how hard you can hit someone, endurance governs how long you can keep hitting him for. Or how long you can keep running, hanging on to the crumbling cliff ledge, and so on. The main purpose of endurance is in determining how many blows your character may make in each melee; one per point of endurance, after which you are winded and consequently attack at a penalty. A high endurance is supremely important for a would-be space scout, and is useful to the space marine or the army man.

Intelligence. While officially intelligence corresponds to IQ — itself in a very shaky position as a measuring-stick — I tend to interpret it as a measure of ability to learn, which makes it a combination of willpower and memory. It's easier to play a character who is simply more determined and with a better memory than yourself than it is to play a genius. Intelligence is useful in every career except the army, and is of supreme importance to the budding interstellar trader.

Education. Indicates the highest level of schooling reached by a character. Its main function in game terms is to define whether or not a character can acquire skills of a basically academic nature, but it is often used as a way of deciding whether or not a character has previously encountered some important fact or rumour. It is most useful to the space navy man, but careers in the army or marines can also be furthered by it.

Social Standing. Indicates your character's position in society; very high rolls indicate nobility, while lower rolls show a lower status. If high, it is useful for those aspiring to officer ranks within the navy or marines.

The most important aspect of your character is his personality. The best advice I can give here is to refer you to the sample character, Jamieson, in *Book 1* of *Traveller.* In essence, the dice rolls are used to write a short story showing who the character is, what his service history has been, and why he is adventuring.

Suppose your merchant rolls a natural 2 for promotion in one term of service. Perhaps he was blamed for a major crash in which many people died. Perhaps it was really the captain's fault, and your character was only a scapegoat. Perhaps the wreck was never salvaged, and there are quantities of gems aboard, and your merchant seeks to recover them and revenge himself on the captain, clearing his name. Perhaps he acquired several levels of Navigation skill in later terms. Obviously, he is applying himself with a will to locating the lost ship. How did he escape, and why doesn't he know where the ship is? He was found drifting in a lifeboat having lost his memory. . . or was he drugged by pirates? Who can tell? You see, you can get quite a lot out of the dice rolls you made in generating a character. Of course, in this case or many others, you'd have to clear it with the referee; if you have been involved in great events, others will know. In the case above, the captain may still be alive. He may want to shut the character up for good. People encountered in starports may recognise this merchant as the one who ate 110 passengers while waiting for rescue (although he claims he only ate one foot), and react accordingly. If you have a good story to tell about your character, it makes your gaming more fun and the referee's task is easier too, because you supply him with non-player characters and plots that he might use, or at least ideas for them. Most importantly, it may supply you with an objective.

The crucial thing for any *Traveller* character is an *objective.* A character must have a goal to direct himself towards, or the game will quickly become boring. He must have a reason for adventuring. There are many such, for example:

Power. People desire power for many reasons — some just for its own sake. Perhaps you must prove yourself worthy of a potential spouse. Perhaps you just like ordering people around.

Money. Perhaps you have huge debts from gambling. Perhaps you like the good life, and can't live in the style to which you are accustomed on a normal wage. Or you have an expensive thionite habit. Perhaps you just like money for its own sake. Maybe you are desperately afraid of growing old, and need piles of filthy lucre to pay for the anagathic drugs that will prevent it.

Revenge. You need money/power/status to revenge yourself on the people who . . . railroaded you out of the service; wrongly accused you of a foul crime; killed your parents/lover/begonias/best friend or any of a number of dark deeds.

Wanderlust. You like to see strange new worlds, perhaps; you just can't settle down to a 9 to 5 job after all that charging around the Galaxy shooting people; you crave excitement, maybe. Perhaps you are pursued by nefarious forces because you know too much about someone. Your Aunt Minnie is dying of Foulsham's Disease, and you've heard that the cure is known to tribal shamans somewhere in this subsector.

Helpful Hints

First, whether you are the player or referee it is useful to have a couple of pregenerated characters handy in case you, or someone else, wants to join in quickly. People are sometimes put off by the time taken to generate characters, and certainly it's no fun for everyone else just waiting around as the eighth scout you've tried to dice up gets eaten by a Ravenous Bug-Blatter Beast on Traal.

Characters should choose their morals, depending on their life history so far; but they should stick to them. A black-hearted villain who has been eating the low passengers to save on life-support costs is unlikely to be kind to small children, animals or beginning characters. Good guys don't mercilessly shoot opponents for no apparent reason. Be consistent, be believable. Don't give up your life of evil to become a scout-master just because it's convenient for the next half-hour or so. Pirates will not suddenly take a liking to player-characters just because they *are* players; captured merchants will not throw in a steady job to follow a band of footloose adventurers.

A major goal for every *Traveller* is improvement of his skills. For this reason, among others, *Book 4* is popular — it has the Instruction skill allowing characters to teach each other skills they know. However, people do not adventure because taking risks will improve their skills — they adventure to achieve their goals, whatever those may be, and improve their skills in between adventures by training, in order to adventure more safely and effectively.

Next issue — Part II: Refereeing Traveller. ■

An Introduction to Traveller

PART 2: REFEREEING

BY ANDY SLACK

A new referee will need the *Basic Set: Books 1, 2* and *3.* Don't buy dozens of books, supplements and magazines without finding out whether you really like refereeing. If you are already a player, ask your referee what he would recommend, and watch what he is using.

In addition to the *Basic Set,* buy a commercially-produced adventure so that you can get some idea of how to set up scenarios. One of the following scenarios would make a good first buy: *The Kinunir, Research Station Gamma, Twilight's Peak* or Bob McWilliams' *Sable Rose Affair (WD17* and *Best of WD Scenarios)* which has the advantage of being cheaper, but, like *Twilight's Peak,* assumes that you have *Book 4, Mercenary. The Kinunir* has the advantage of presenting four scenario possibilities. Each of the *GDW* booklets mentioned also detail a subsector-sized area of space, which can be used for later scenarios.

Organisation

The keyword for a *Traveller* referee is preparation. There is no real fallback: if the referee isn't feeling inspired, the game isn't going to work and that's that. You must have some sort of plot ready by the time the band has finished equipping itself.

Preparation means knowing the rules, at least the ones which are likely to crop up in the adventure, and knowing the scenario itself. Thoroughly. You'll find that in the recommended scenarios there's very little working out in terms of dicing up characters, animal encounters etc. This will happen in your homegrown scenarios later, but to start with at least you can concentrate on actually running the game.

As you play, you'll rapidly come to know which tables and charts are consulted frequently; copy them somehow, this will save time and also wear and tear on the books. Have ready a price-list for weapons, various items of personal equipment, armour and devices. You can get by with just the price, but ideally also have the weight, the tech level it's first available at, and the highest law level you can carry the item at. These become less important as you and your players get to know the game mechanics.

Make copies of player-characters. It is usually enough just to have their UPP and skills noted, with possibly service and age. If any player forgets his character record, you can then give him a brief precis, enough to play with – likewise if it gets lost. Sooner or later he'll die, and then you can recycle that character as a non-player with a ready-built personality. This tactic is especially useful if you have two or more bands that you referee. It also saves you having to ask characters what their skills or UPP are when saving rolls are required or in similar circumstances – for example, if you have some event which will only be noticed by an Electronics-3 or higher, it's a bit of a giveaway to ask 'Has anyone got Electronic-3?'. This is especially useful if one player has a skill he doesn't want the others to know about, particularly psionic talents. Without doubt the best medium for these brief sketches is the 3" x 5" index card.

Maps

One frequently-advanced method is to collect real maps or maps from other games. If you're a stickler for atmosphere, you'll want to change the names. The overall planetary map isn't really necessary though several adventures require trekking across half a world searching for something. If you know full well that the band, however lost it gets, is not going to reach the other continents on the planet, why bother having a map of them? Conversely, the closer the area is to where the plot will reach its climax, the more detailed the map should be. Most action takes place in a fairly small area, so maps of things like buildings, towns, small tracts of wilderness, ships, and so on, are a necessity, but only do 'close-ups' when it matters. Think of your adventure as being like a novel; don't make the band play through every hour of tramping through the woods; a good storyteller, which is what you are trying to be, will say something like 'The adventurers toiled for hours through the dark, damp woods in the rain.' Be atmospheric by all means, but concentrate on the important scenes of your play, be proportional to its importance.

In the case of towns and buildings, I tend to describe places that I know well but the players don't, and use those more or less regardless. This saves a lot of time and effort in drawing a map and carrying it around. If the characters have a map it just means they will go straight there (wherever 'there' is) and you can omit the street directions. This doesn't work so well in wilderness, but most adventures take place because of and around specific people, which usually means in or near a town of some sort or a similar group of dwellings. Try to avoid using places your players know for this trick; first it ruins the atmosphere, and second, they may know it better than you, and then where are you?

You *will* need a detailed scale plan of wherever the punch-up is going to be, especially if you are using miniature figures. If you are running one or two people you can live without this, but with more than two it becomes essential as everyone loses track of where everyone else is and what they can see. How you handle hidden movement is up to you; it depends on how much you trust you players. They are few who will say, 'OK, I don't think I'd know that scorposaur was around the corner, so it should surprise me.' On the other hand, the players are just your friends, whereas the characters are rough, tough space rangers with 20 years experience of doing things like this.

It is useful, if you have a few other games, to carry their maps around with you. Things like *Sniper!, StarSoldier, Starship Troopers, GEV* will provide a terrain map for random punch-ups or other events that you've not got a plan ready for. People will argue that it's unrealistic to keep using the same three or four maps all the time; tell them it compensates for the fact that their characters have intimate knowledge of the local area – and they will

have; characters like that are going to spend hours poring over local maps and days walking the streets before and during a scenario.

Methods

There are a couple of ways of starting: some people like to just read the description of the initial set-up to the players straight out of the book/zine/whatever, or, to be more atmospheric, start them a few days before they run into the patron so that they get the feel of the world or city, and start worrying about running out of money. This also allows time for equipment purchase.

Since you'll probably start by using a commercial scenario, you can follow that for the most part. You will make mistakes — everyone does. Don't worry about it. As you get into the swing of things they will become fewer. They will never disappear entirely; they usually involve an argument over the rules or scenario, and one of the main arts of the referee is to be able to adjudicate these. In their basic form, they consist of a player disagreeing with you about whether something is reasonable or not. You must be firm, but fair; consider his point of view, and if it sounds reasonable, agree. But you are the ref and your word is law. Many times you will just just not be able to make up a convincing answer to a question on the spot; ask the dice. Phrase your problem as one or more yes/no questions and roll, high means yes.

Don't rely on technicalities of science for a plot, an adventure, or an excuse. You are far too likely to be wrong. People often forget that our science doesn't know everything, and that its history involves many reversals of theory. As with all things, it is a matter of balance. There are two rules: 'don't put it in the scenario if you haven't got a plausible excuse for its existence', and 'think of the effect first — then explain it.'

A common mistake among players and referees is to rely on gadgetry that often serves no useful purpose, in that when the grunge rifle is neatly worked out and typed up it is either capable of devastating continents or not much better than an ordinary rifle. In the first case, if the players, poor and unorganised as they are, have these things, the Imperium and police will have them as well because they've got unlimited money and research time. In the second case, what's the point of building it in the first place? You must always leave the players a way out, if they are but smart enough to think of it; so super-weapons are out. Super-gadgetry takes the emphasis away from players too; always the question is, if the machines are so good why are people still doing the job? This illustrates the Golden Rule of *Traveller;* it's the people that matter. You need believable characterisation of non-players' personalities, and that is the single most valuable item in a ref's armoury. Don't concentrate on *how* he's shooting up the party; concentrate on *why* he's firing. It's characterisation and background that will make or break a game and their interaction which will generate your plots and scenarios.

For many players, combat *is* the game. The trick is not to make it gratuitous violence, because people die awfully fast in *Traveller* and the first decent shot will waste them. The fighting must mean something; you don't usually get attacked as you put a quarter-credit into a dopestick machine at the Travellers' Aid Society. People attack you for a reason — usually because you have something they want or vice-versa. The combat in a *Traveller* adventure should be of two kinds; random and planned. The random kind is from attacks by bandits, carnivores etc as the band travels towards its goal. These assailants have an 'incidental' purpose — they are hungry or after loot, and the players are the first thing to come their way since last Tuesday. Well and good, they keep the action moving along and stimulate interest. Try not to kill them here.

The planned kind are attacks by people or creatures with 'primary' purposes; they defend what the players are looking for, etc. This should be the climax of the whole adventure, the toughest fight for the biggest prize. This is how the heroes die; their minions can get snuffed by pirates on the way, but a player-character should always be able to ask with his dying breath, 'Did we make it?', and on being told that the rest of the group have succeeded, or at least escaped alive, gasp 'Then it was worth it!' A player must feel his character died for a worthwhile reason.

Let the players and the referee have the benefit of the characters' knowledge. If a player knows Electronics and his character doesn't then the character cannot be allowed to use the players' knowledge. If the character knows Electronics and the player doesn't, don't say 'It's a mosfet,' and grin evilly. Say, 'It's a mosfet, which you know is a fairly common component that does so-and-so. . . .' Don't penalise a player for not knowing what his character does. Likewise, you will often need to say, 'Well, I don't know how you'd use this mosfet to repair the radio, but you have Electronics-3. Whatever the best way to do it is, you'll know, if I don't, and that's what you'll do. Roll your dice.'

The game should run smoothly and enjoyably. This is more important than sticking to the rules. You are under no obligation to do things the way *GDW* or anyone else says you should, nor are you under an obligation to ignore anything that doesn't have someone's seal of approval on it as being official, nor are you obliged to accept everything that says *Traveller* on it somewhere. It is your game, and in the long run you have a veto on whatever anyone else says about how you run it, whether he be manufacturer, player, or what. But again it's a question of balance; you have to let your players help you in moulding your universe, and in any case it saves you work — just remember you have the last word.

As to how many players, the game is best with 2-4 like any role-player. The most I've ever handled with any success is 6; with more than 3, it's a fair bet someone is getting bored.

Expansions

If you are certain you do want to referee the game on a long-term basis, you will be thinking of getting some of the various expansions and supplements. Decide whether you are going to create your own campaign or use pre-generated backgrounds supplied by manufacturers or magazines. If you want to stay with *GDW's* universe, for instance, you will be well-advised to make *Supplement 3, The Spinward Marches,* your next item. Whether you design your own campaign or not depends on how much time, money, and imagination you have. If money is not a problem, but you don't have a great deal of spare time, the best bet is to follow most other referees and stay with the *Spinward Marches.* There is still a lot you can do fleshing it out and creating scenarios, depending on how creative you are, or simply in running other people's adventures well.

In terms of rules, it depends what you want. Almost certainly you will want *Mercenary, Book 4;* it is to *Traveller* as *Greyhawk* was to original *D&D.* The expanded generation system turns out much more skilled and military-oriented characters, which the players like; there are stacks of new weapons and armour, a few scenario ideas, an abstract system for large combats, and the mighty Instruction skill which allows people to learn new skills — or rather, teach them.

Snapshot is also useful, though by no means necessary, presenting a more detailed close combat system, a couple of deck plans, and some scenarios. *Mayday* is less worthwhile, having a variant of the *Book 2* ship combat rules which is easy and fast in play. There are also the missile construction rules.

With *Book 5, High Guard,* you will be mainly interested in the first dozen pages or so — the expanded naval character generation system. You can have some fun finding out that the *Book 2* small craft are impossible to build using the *Book 5* small craft system, designing some new ones to player shipowners' orders, and ego-trip building million-ton deathstars you'll never be able to use in a scenario, but basically you want the character system.

Since the *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* is usually out of print within weeks, you may want to subscribe. Its main advantage is the continuous stream of scenario ideas — they need a lot of work to be playable sometimes, but the idea's the thing. *The Best of the Journal,* issues 1-4, is worth getting if you like robots and asteroid miners since it covers these, as well as the famous Gazelle class, which is a very nice ship.

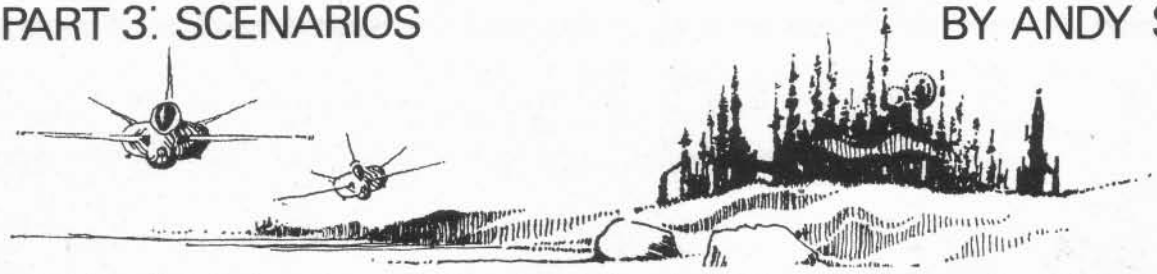
As to supplements, I find *Animal Encounters* helpful because I'm too lazy to roll them up myself, and *Citizens of the Imperium* for its new character types. ■

Next issue: Part III — Scenarios.

An Introduction to Traveller

PART 3: SCENARIOS

BY ANDY SLACK



A scenario in *Traveller* is the focus of a game session. It is typically opened by some powerful non-player character hiring the player-characters for a specific purpose and for a specific reward. The adventure then occurs as the players attempt to perform the task set them by the patron, and pick up whatever else they can along the way. This poses several immediate questions.

First: Why has a powerful person chosen to hire these blood-thirsty down-and-outs anyway? (Immediately followed by 'And why does he trust them?') The patron is often a person of considerable influence in government, commerce or the military; why hasn't he got minions on tap to do his dirty work? There are several reasons why someone who can afford to pay the group enough to make their efforts worthwhile should hire them.

1: He can't get hold of normal employees with the right skills. For example, if a patron needs something forging he may well not have a resident forger in his company or office. The right skills could be illegal, or otherwise hard to come by, due to a high casualty rate – there aren't any of his usual staff who will take such a dangerous job, or because the world the band are on hasn't got anyone with the right skill; for example a Tech Level 3 ruler who needs an electronic engineer to repair his communications net and has no locals suitably trained. Perhaps there was an engineer present from the company which installed this equipment, who has now been scalped by rival rulers or recalled by head office because the bills weren't paid. This may be more sophisticated; an Imperial base commander would normally have some pilots attached to his organisation, but if accidentally they are in hospital, on a course in another system, drunk, in jail, or performing other vital duties while the free trader *Cerberus* is falling into the sun with disabled drives, he may well hire or commandeer the players to drive a rescue mission.

2: The patron's normal employees can't be trusted. The commission is perhaps illegal, and if his usual staff were ordered to do it they would turn the patron in to the local cops. Again, if the patron's men are being watched he may try to recruit someone whom the watchers will not suspect or connect with him. Locals are perhaps 'out to get' the patron, and he feels that the group will be safe by virtue of their foreign origins – they will be uninvolved in local politics or unsympathetic to it. The commission need not be illegal; it could be just distasteful, like evicting crippled grannies at Christmas. It could be neither; a mega-corporation surveying a new region for minerals, aware that its rival monitors its own prospecting teams.

3: In this case, the players are to be a sacrificial decoy; another group is performing the actual mission in secret, and the players are there as a scapegoat and diversion. For example, a spy or assassin about to knock over a prominent politician could well hire the players, ostensibly to do the hit, and at the last minute betray them to the police so that his own attempt has fewer obstacles, the police being occupied with the players. A variant on this is the blackmailed patsy; in this case, the players are threatened with even more dire consequences if they don't undertake the suicide run. Another variant is the case where the patron secretly expects the players to be caught doing something illegal, and wants to be able to deny his involvement – difficult if he used his own minions.

Of course, there are many more possibilities, such as being hired by peasants to do a remake of *Seven Samurai,* finding rumours, lost documents and so on. Why should the patron trust the players? Again, there are several possibilities.

1: Reputation. The players may be well-enough established that the patron has heard of their competence and fair play. This is only possible if the players don't move around too much; but perhaps the patron or a friend of his has used this band before and been satisfied, or perhaps their service records are exemplary. Note that this works both ways – a referee could modify the chances of a commission turning up depending on how the previous ones were handled. For example, 'Big Luigi says you guys are good with safes, so I came looking for you', or alternatively, 'Thinks: This bunch are all thumbs – no way am I hiring them after that fiasco at the Altair State Bank.'

2: Blackmail. The patron has something on the band, possibly details of previous capers, and threatens to make it public unless the group performs his commission; alternatively, the players can be framed by police or other agencies and told that charges might be dropped if they could see their way to doing this little job... or some friend or relative of the players may be held hostage.

3: Lack of opportunity for betrayal. The patron has some more trustworthy operatives watching or working with the band and so expects to be able to detect and forestall any treachery.

4: Lack of motive for betrayal. This occurs when the commission is so seemingly innocuous that the band have nothing to gain by betraying their patron. This is usually the set-up when the apparent commission is only incidental to the main flow of the adventure, as for example when the group is to uncover some sinister plot or treasure 'accidentally' during the course of their work. Alternatively, though this is not recommended, the commission if handled honestly could be so lucrative as to tempt not even the greediest and nastiest character.

Naturally, if the scenario is set in motion not by a patron hiring the band, but by 'accidentally' finding some item or data, or by an attack on them, the above motives are not necessary.

The second question is, what is the task the band are to perform? Here the range of possibilities is so large as to be practically infinite, but in practice there are two broad types of mission; acquisition and defence. This is an over-simplification, but basically the band can be hired to obtain some item, person or information, or to make sure that someone else doesn't. Exactly what the object or target is is variable; rare objets d'art, high-ranking noblemen's children, information about a manufacturing process or a particular place, and so on.

In *WD30's Starbase* Bob McWilliams made an important point – essentially when you see or read anything that inspires you, take a brief note of the plot and major characters. Details will need to be changed so that the plotline fits into your own campaign background, and so that the players don't recognise it and thus immediately leap to the right conclusion. Don't neglect actual history, either; even some other FRP games can provide good ideas.

It saves a great deal of time and effort if you only note down the bare bones of your plot, in the style of *Supplement 6's* commissions. A scenario only needs great detail if you want someone else to be able to run it, for example if you intend to publish it. If you are primarily interested in having an enjoyable game for a few hours with some friends, you won't need all that detail – much of it will already be in your background notes (these are often mental) for the campaign or subsector of space you are currently running. And the longer you have been running a

particular universe, the briefer your notes will become, as you and your players will remember some of it from previous games, such as the political situation fuelling the current crisis they have become involved in, or the local alien life's habits.

This improvisational style, only generating the details as necessary using logic or dice rolls, is difficult at first, but improves with practice, and especially if you remember or note down these details as they appear in response to the player's questions, it gradually becomes easier. There is a stage after a few dozen hours play where the whole set-up becomes self-sustaining, and previous happenings more or less dictate what the details must be.

After you have been running your universe for a few scenarios, you will find ideas for later ones starting to appear. You'll put yourself momentarily in the shoes of major non-player characters, and ask yourself: 'Shouldn't he really want to do something about such-and-such?' Hire the party, for instance? Or attack them in revenge for their theft of his prize orgone accumulator? Here is where the true homegrown commissions come from – the interaction of your background and your non-player patrons. The more detailed these become, the more scenarios they will produce. The characters' own activities help, too; they may decide to aim for some common goal, such as stealing a starship or finding a psionics institute; and your scenario will practically write itself from then on.

An article called *Instant Adventures* in Volume V, No 10 of *The Dragon,* by Michael Kelly is a very useful piece, listing a couple of dozen basic plots for scenarios, and in each case giving notes on what preparation the referee has to make for the scenario and how long this will take.

The next question is that of reward. What should the player characters get if they are successful? Reward covers many things; most frequently it will be cash, but it could also be in terms of useful knowledge (location of the psionics institute, perhaps), favours from those in high places, improvement of skills or psionic talents (though this must not be overdone, and such improvement is best purchased by training between adventures), the dropping of charges against the group, or something simple like not having their arms and legs removed without anaesthetic.

Reward depends on how much your players already have, how long they have to wait between jobs, and how important success is to the patron. The patron's own wealth is also a major consideration. There is more opportunity for unbalancing the game through giving players too much as a reward for success than in any other way. As a rough guide, it helps to think of a Credit (the *Traveller* monetary unit) as being worth about 50p; this is also useful when asked by a player for the price of something not listed in the rules.

The average traveller will live comfortably for a couple of months on a thousand or so Credits, and this should be your minimum reward for each adventurer so long as they only have themselves and their personal equipment to support. The maximum reward should be a couple of tens of thousands of Credits; enough to live well for a while and travel on to the next world, and buy some useful equipment. This is the level to start players at if you can; it minimises work in designing planets and the affairs of worlds.

Some players start with starships, or eventually obtain them. The minimum reward for anyone who has enough money (or big enough debts) that the above rewards are no longer tempting should be tens of thousands, the maximum hundreds of thousands. By now the player has several minions to support and a vehicle or two; he is nearing the end of the rise to power started when he was satisfied with Cr1,000 for a job.

There is a natural progression towards greater wealth and power among player characters. The wealthier they become, the more equipment and minions they will acquire; thus the more easily they can succeed in simple commissions. Fortunately, these simple commissions then no longer pay enough to satisfy; so larger-scale plots are required, which because of their greater scope are rarer, more difficult, and with greater rewards attached. After perhaps several years of play, some groups will have accumulated enough wealth to design a ship for themselves; this is generally a break-point – from that moment on the group must search out its own tasks, invent its own commissions as it were, since they have become patrons in their own right.

An alternative to this pattern of 'one-off' scenarios is the service adventure, which can take several forms but essentially, the players are hired as troubleshooters on a long-term basis by some patron or other. This has advantages, in that the players have an overall goal. Here, they need simply obey orders until the time comes when their character is developed enough to have its own aim in life. These orders, by the way, like all orders from patrons and commissions, should be broad outlines, with actual tactical objectives and methods left to the group's discretion. Otherwise, if the patron offers guidance and gives orders at every step, there is no need for any players, and they certainly have no sense of influencing events, which is important to the feel of the game.

A second advantage is that powerful equipment necessary for a particular scenario can be more easily loaned to the characters, then repossessed after the trip so as not to make them too powerful for the next mission.

The disadvantage is that players may feel stifled by being part of an organisation; they may want to do something different, turn the task down and so on. They can always leave the service; but in fact, since the referee rarely has more than one or two scenarios which are ready to run, the players' choice isn't really that much more limited.

This approach gives the referee more control over the players, who may be organised into a chain of command with one player having actual authority over the others, usually by virtue of rank or social standing. Also, it eases the referee's tasks in preparing adventures for the group by reducing his options; and paradoxically, it is sometimes easier to create a scenario if your initial possibilities are limited. It is useful to find out what sort of services the players would like to be in if this is the way you're going; they might not have mustered out of the military yet. Other potential employers worthy of note are megacorporations requiring security guards or explorers to search for new markets and products in an unmapped sector, mercenary companies, intelligence moguls, pirates or bandits of any kind, and bounty hunters. ■

Next issue – Part IV: Campaigns.

An Introduction to Traveller

PART 4: CAMPAIGNS

BY ANDY SLACK

In this issue's Introduction to Traveller *Andy Slack looks at the ways referees can go about setting up their own campaign universes and where to get and how to use interesting ideas and plots for adventures to run.*

The decision to run a campaign can occur any time during your exposure to the game; sometimes people become referees solely in order to start a campaign, at other times a campaign will grow almost by itself out of a linked list of scenarios. So how to go about it?

The question is, what kind of adventures do you want to referee? That's to say, are the players going to be revolutionaries, spies, would-be merchant princes, mercenaries, serving Imperial personnel, criminals? The key point is that too many referees start by designing their universe, and only then asking what the players can do in it. Start by deciding what kind of adventures to run, and create a campaign background which will give suitable opportunities.

Second important decision: How much of your campaign will be homegrown, and how much borrowed from published games, scenarios, novels, films and so on? There are several factors bearing on your choice. First and pragmatically, how much time, effort and money are you prepared to sink into your campaign? Which do you have more of to spare? If money is no object, but you have practically no spare time to design in, you will probably wind up running a *Spinward Marches* variant campaign from published material. The important thing to bear in mind is that it will be a variant; any published sector is necessarily vague, and since we are all individuals as soon as we start filling in the details those details will diverge from the designer's idea of how the universe works. Be prepared to remind your players gently from time to time that you are under no obligation to include *Supplement 47*'s ideas on grunge rifles into your campaign, just because they happen to be waving it under your nose.

Using published materials, especially the *Spinward Marches*, has another advantage besides being quick; if you move around a lot, or meet a lot of new players who will be in the group only temporarily, you will have a lot less explaining to do since most of them will already be familiar with the background. Also, if you use a reasonably high-quality product, you can be certain of it being fairly believable - important if you haven't run or played in too many campaigns previously.

The second alternative for a campaign demands both a reasonable amount of cash and quite a bit of effort. This kind of campaign is based on a novel, film, or game. In this, you get the novel, film script, game, whatever you're using, and go through it notebook in hand, taking notes on the background, worlds, governments, technology, races, and so on.Then you sit down with the notes and the rules and translate everything into *Traveller* terms. Again, both you and your players must expect the campaign to slowly diverge from the source. This method has advantages and disadvantages as do they all; some of your players will know the source, and so you'll have less explaining to do; some of them will know it better than you, and ask Awkward Questions. Care must be taken as to which source you use, but this is a matter of personal taste. For novels and series, I'd recommend the *Dominic Flandry* and *Polesotechnic League* stories, both by Poul Anderson; E C Tubb's *Dumarest* saga;Jerry Pournelle's *Future History* (including the *Mote in God's Eye*); H Beam Piper's *Federation and Empire* stories; Frank Herbert's *Dune*. And, of course the *Star Wars* films. Most TV series and SF films are a bit unbelievable for my own taste.

The third major method is to do it all yourself. Obviously, this is at once the cheapest and most time-consuming, and it also has to be explained to your players in detail - though not necessarily all at once. However, it will be exactly what you want, and have exactly what you want in it.

What follows is perhaps less relevant to a campaign based on published sources or novels, but is essential to the do-it-yourself variety.

It consists of writing an overview of your background. This needs to cover both the history and geography of the campaign area - perhaps astrography would be a better word. You need a rough sketch-map of campaign space; this has to show the location and extent of the major power blocs and governments. Do you see the future as a mass of system-states, a vast all-encompassing Empire, or a myriad tiny states of a few to a few dozen planets each?

In trying to 'predict' the future for our games, it's helpful to look to the past. Throughout history there have been pressures for unification of small communities like the Greek city-states; the unification has usually happened, and by conquest or colonisation. Once unified, states are usually held together by loyalty to a leader or dynasty, which is usually supported by the priesthood. So whatever they call themselves, we will likely have a state religion and leaders.

In the *Traveller* universe, the area governed by an interstellar state - assuming one would rise out of the 'inevitable' pressure to unify - is large, and communication across it is slow. The government must have two attributes then; emotional ties to keep its subjects loyal, and stability. A hereditary aristocracy has both these, and while not inevitable, has the advantages of being believable and having a lot of opportunity for scenarios. The ancient Persians are a good place to start looking for ideas on how to run your Empire.

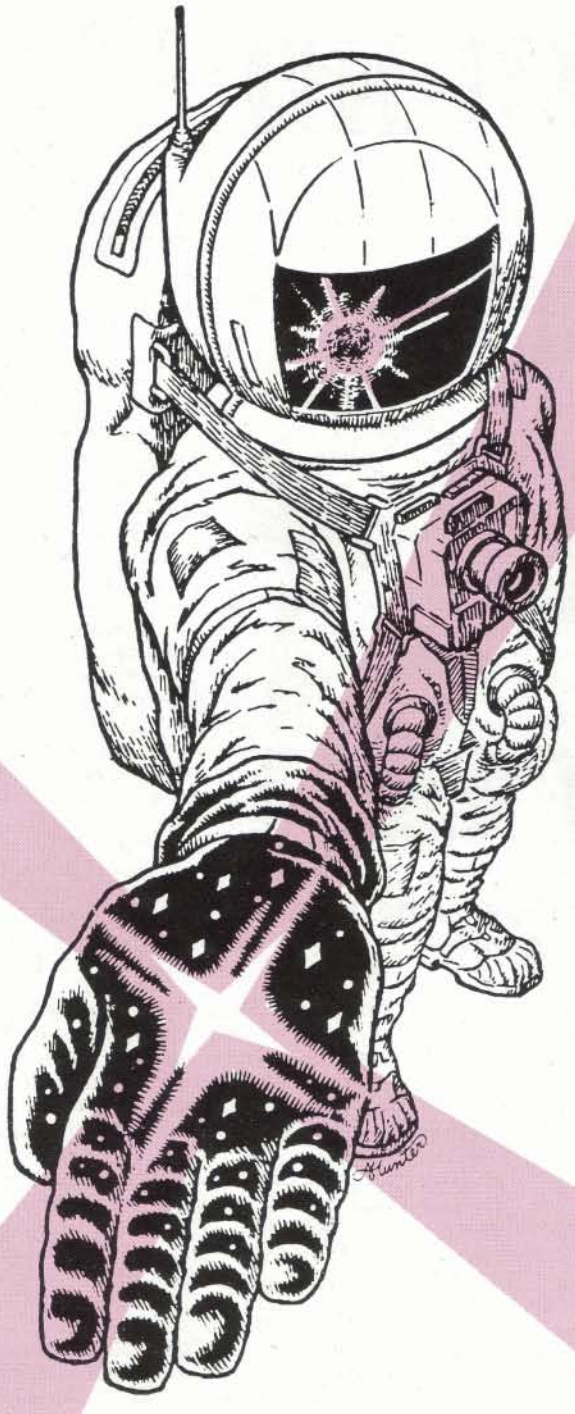
Now, assuming you have a fair-sized Empire, as most referees do, there is one thing you must keep in mind; the Emperor is likely to be more worried about one of his provincial governors revolting and trying to seize the throne or become independent than anything else short of a really major interstellar war. How is he going to ensure it doesn't happen? Again, the Persians had some good ideas. These include independent inspectors wandering around, spies everywhere, the best communications you can manage, and being related to all the provincial rulers. A common step is to separate military and civil rule, so that the armed forces are controlled by independent admirals/generals.

How big is your main state going to be? That is, the state your players live in. Probably it will grow to the maximum size its communications will allow; if we assume that the state will build the best possible courier ships and is prepared to cope with a lag of, say, two years between sending an order and getting an acknowledgment of its receipt - about the biggest lag humans have ever managed - then you have the answer straight away; depending on the rules in use, your Empire will have jump-5 or jump-6 couriers, so at most it will be 52 weeks x jump-6 in radius, or about 300 parsecs from frontier to capital. A little smaller wouldn't hurt, as it's now too big for comfortable comprehension. Using the unadulterated *Book 3* rules, that gives the Empire about 3,500 subsectors and almost 150,000 worlds. More than you'll ever need.

The other states must include several roughly comparable in size to the main one - its main rivals; and many smaller ones.

You're probably panicking by now! Calm down. You will never need more than a dozen or so subsectors to play in; the rest need only be very roughly sketched in on a master map the players will likely never see. When you pick the locale for your campaign, choose a frontier region since this gives the adventurers the most scope. The police are too powerful nearer the centre of government. So, you have a sketch map maybe the size of a *WD* page with major states blocked out on it, and have picked an area of a few subsectors in size to be the main theatre of action.

On to history. Simply put, this must tell how the state the



players are citizens of got to its present position. Again, real history can be shamelessly stolen. Major historical events, such as wars, the invention of jump drive, brief history of the rulers and possibly the state religion, are sketched out on a sheet or two of paper. The players' characters are useful here, especially in the expanded *Mercenary* and *High Guard* systems; their prior service die rolls and assignments fill in detail of the last few decades. If a marine was involved in a battle 4 years ago, there must have been one around then for him to fight in; check your map and decide with whom he fought. How long has the main state had a presence in the region? Why did it come? Was anyone there before then, and how did they feel about it?

The history should also touch briefly on alien races, if any. Alien races are essentially chrome; they look nice and give a nice feel to the game, but usually not necessary. Most adventures can get by very well with only humans involved, the same as most science fiction games. Whenever you introduce one, think - could I achieve the same effect with humans or human states? Most players will request aliens for one of two reasons: (a) to give them something horrible to shoot at with the full approval of their government and other non-player characters; (b) to get hold of a superhuman character for themselves. The classic examples of (a) and (b) respectively are Bugs (from *Starship Troopers*) and either Vulcans or Wookies for the second. In either case, humans are quite sufficient for game purposes. Nonetheless, most referees will want alien races to help the 'feel' of the game - and rightly so! But make sure they *are* alien, and moderately believable; make sure their motives and approach to problems are different from the established human norm of your campaign. Limit them to about one new race per subsector at most.

You've selected a region of the master sketch map and given it an interesting mention in your historical overview. Now, you choose a subsector arbitrarily and work through it in reasonable detail, dicing up the worlds and assigning its worlds to one or another, or none, of the local states and races. No more than the subsector map, names and statistics or worlds are required yet. If you know exactly what kind of worlds you want there, don't dice them; design them deliberately.

Now choose one of your worlds and flesh it out in detail. Bearing in mind everything you've decided so far, you now create the world the adventurers will start on. It may not need fleshing out; you may have pinched one from a published source. You need, in addition to the stats, a couple of pages on the society, government, and mores of the locals, and a few NPC personages worked out in some detail - note that the more powerful the NPC, the less need you have of his characteristics and skills; attitudes and motives are far more important, and increasingly so at higher social levels.

I recommend an essentially earthlike world to start with; this minimises the shock of adjusting for both referee and players. A low-grade starport will help you keep the players on-planet until you're ready for them to move on; size, atmosphere and water percentage similar to our own mean you can stop worrying about them and get on with the adventure; a balkanised world with several governments allows for plenty of action on one world, and average to low law and tech levels help the fun. Population should be fairly low, though, at around levels 5-8, to give a pleasant frontier atmosphere.

Animal encounter tables - well, I usually use *Supplement 2*. It's a lot of hassle dicing up endless animals most of which will be only peripheral details on the game's progress, mere background detail of an unimportant kind. What is important to the game is the creature's appearance and habits, for background and often the animals will hardly enter into an adventure at all. Only if you expect your group to be heavily involved with animals in their adventures on the planet should you bother working them out or detailing them. If you do, I recommend a look at Dougall Dixon's book *After Man* and David Attenborough's *Life on Earth*, both of which will show that creatures can be weird and still believable. An interesting technique is used by Dixon, which referees could well adopt; take an ordinary animal, say a rat or penguin, and stuff it into the wrong ecological niche. Leave for 25 million years to evolve, and see what you come up with. Dixon's penguins which have tried to do a whale's job, or rats hired as polar bears through lack of other suitable applicants, have a marvellous feel to them and would enhance any role-player. Such animals are believable and consistent, but at the same time novel. That's what you need.

The struggle - I'll be brief here as I've already covered this theme in *Backdrop of Stars [WD24]*. Until your players find their feet and invent their own goals in your universe, you must provide them with a struggle to generate commissions. A war or revolution perhaps, culled from your background - that is essentially what it is for, to generate moderate-to-large scale plots in which the players may become immersed. Do the players think they are good guys or wearing black hats? Are they freedom fighters or terrorists in their own eyes? And what do the locals, the government, think of them? It's more fun if the viewpoints aren't in agreement; as for example when the players see themselves as neutrals out for a quick buck, the locals see them as daring Robin Hood types, and the government sees them as terrorists...

Essentially, this is the overall plot of your series of adventures. Each scenario along the way is part of a grander design - a coup d'etat is a nice one to aim at. The struggle is tricky, though; you must try to stop the players from getting so powerful that they have no further need to adventure, while not making them feel that whatever they do makes no difference to the flow of games' events.□