



Preventing Complacency in TRAVELLER® Gaming

by Roger E. Moore

TRAVELLER gamers have been known to believe that the strings of numbers describing the various worlds tell them everything they need to know. Starport class, world size, atmosphere, government type, ho hum. Some players never look at the world codes at all unless figuring out where they can unload the 40-ton shipment of farm machinery they purchased on speculation.

This is unfortunate; TRAVELLER game referees may find it amusing to unplug this complacency. Are all worlds alike? Not a chance. There are millions of little things the world code doesn't tell you and numerous ways in which the code can be interpreted or (heh heh) be in error.

Each sector in the TRAVELLER game universe has hundreds of individual worlds, most of which may never be visited by the adventurers. There is an underlying assumption that every world is unique, but individualizing each world is a tough task for the referee. Often it seems easier to let the worlds blend into one another, especially if adventurers make only brief landfalls before jumping to a new system. It takes time to make Kerchov's Planet a different environment from Ramsiiland when both share the same TRAVELLER game world codes. Slower-paced campaigns in which adventurers only visit one world per game session at most are better for allowing a campaign to be more fully developed.

Planning ahead is essential, though some people can invent whole solar systems at the drop of a jump drive. Before a gaming session starts, the referee should make notes on all stellar systems within a six-parsec radius of the

point where the group will be starting. Such notes should emphasize particular aspects of each world that serve to make it different from all the rest. For example, noting that the Mayhem system has an asteroid belt, the referee could include a few giant meteorite craters on the surface of the main world; the starport could be located in the center of one of them on a mountain peak. Particular details like these can be elaborated upon as the adventures on that world continue.

There are many ways to interpret the world codes themselves. A size 0 world is assumed to indicate an asteroid colony. However, it could also be a colony based upon an asteroid-sized moon orbiting another world. Perhaps no other bodies except the asteroid the colony rests on exist in the system (most people assume there should be an entire asteroid belt present with a size 0 world). Consider, too, a colony aboard a large artificial space station or a modified starship (like the Azhanti High Lightning) with no jump drives. Not large enough to qualify even for asteroid status, the "space city" could orbit close to its parent sun to gain enormous amounts of solar energy, or orbit far in the outer system using nuclear or other power sources. Even asteroid colonies need never look alike; one could rest in the hollowed-out interior of a 20 km long asteroid, while another rests on the surface of a 310 km diameter body with tunnels beneath it.

Planetary atmospheres seem to have a dreary sameness about them in most campaigns. Tainted air is generally thought to come from industrial pollution, but it might also indicate dust parti-

cles large enough to produce allergies, choking, or respiratory problems. There could be a mildly toxic gas in the air that produces drowsiness, nausea, euphoria, or poor vision. Pollen grains could induce hallucinations by biochemical interaction in the nervous system. Erupting volcanoes, nuclear fallout, plague viruses, and war-related chemical poisons could all be causes for tainted atmospheres. The aftereffects of exposure may range from innocuous to severe, with an equally variable time-delay before the aftereffects appear.

Aside from normal saline oceans of water, hydrographic percentages could refer to huge frozen seas across which iceships skate. The local temperature could be so high that the oceans steam, resulting in almost continual 100% humidity. Corrosive atmosphere worlds could have alkaline or acidic seas, while other planets could have oceans with salt concentrations a thousand times that of Earth's. Lakes of liquid ammonia and methane might exist on frozen planets, and rivers of molten sulfur could flow on hot ones. In either of the latter cases, the atmosphere would almost certainly not be breathable.

World size, atmosphere, and hydrographic percentages need not remain always unchanged, either. An asteroid colony moving to a regular planet would result in a sudden increase in the world size listing for that system. Collision with a large asteroid could shatter a small world. A "clean" atmosphere could become tainted in a number of ways and may then be "cleaned up" by artificial or natural means. A rise or fall in solar output, changes in planetary orbit, or artificial tinkering could alter the hydrographic proportion. It is fair to say, however, that once established, these three statistics should generally remain constant.

This is not true of the "live" statistics, those that relate to the world population. Population size, government type, law level and tech level could all fluctuate widely over time, generally tending to rise toward higher populations, more restrictive law levels, and more advanced tech levels. Government types may tend to become more inflexible over time as well. As always, of course, there are exceptions.

Major changes could even be fairly rapid. A year after leaving a primitive world with some hundreds of thousands of citizens, ruled by an oligarchy that restricts ownership of all weapons, the travelers may return to discover that a new sentient race has been discovered

in the world's jungles, that a revolution has taken place, and now the world has millions of citizens, a charismatic dictator who doesn't care what weapons her subjects own, and has imported high-technology systems from a megacorporation. Surprise! Culture shock strikes again.

Interpreting these statistics in different ways will also produce chaos. Depending upon who did the counting, the population number might reflect only one sex, one race, or one country on the world. Maybe the government took its own census and purposefully altered the figures to appear stronger or weaker than it really is. How often are these figures updated, anyway? Frontier worlds in particular might be subject to extraordinary population growth over short periods of time.

Where government types are listed, special problems come into play. It is entirely possible that a government could be called one thing and function as something else entirely. A government managed by a corporation might be set up as a dictatorship or a workers' democracy. Captive governments might be free in all but name, or could be complete puppets to another power. Consider, too, that often a government might be listed as how it *wants* to be seen, not how it actually works. With an entire galaxy to map as well, perhaps those who compile the data for the world listings make mistakes or make superficial surveys of the worlds in question. This could produce amusing incidents similar to those described in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series by Douglas Adams.

It is conceivable that one could have a law level 9 world where no one owns weapons, but on which crime is rampant. It is also possible to have a peaceful nation where even ownership of plasma weapons is allowed to citizens. The die roll involved in determining whether or not adventurers are spotted by police and arrested for some offense could be made separate from the tech level number; this would add more uncertainty to the plans that many adventurers develop to loot low-tech worlds and escape scot-free. And what law level would one give a world where only energy weapons may be owned?

The tech level value assigned to a world may not truly reflect the range of items and materials available there. A planet can always import high-technology equipment, though maintaining it may be difficult. Shortages of material or manpower might restrict the variety

of goods that a world would be expected to offer; local circumstances should also be taken into account. Given a high-tech culture based on a planet covered by a vast ocean, one would find extensive air/raft and boating industries but little or nothing of automotive or ATV technology except for sea-bottom rovers. Cultures on desert worlds like Mars would not produce boats. Exceptional radio interference caused by solar storms or the like would prohibit development of radio technology except under very specialized conditions.

Low-tech cultures might have surprises of their own in store. Aside from the import of high-tech goods, local materials might do admirably well as replacements for manufactured items. Raupp's World, for instance, has a plant that produces silvery and highly reflective leaves. When woven together, they may be made into suits of reflect armor. Granted, the suits deteriorate over time, but they're cheap and easy to make.

In short, world codes are useful, but must be regarded with caution. Taking them for granted can easily lead to a dreadful situation such as the purely hypothetical one that follows:

"Okay," announces a player, "We're about to land on a tainted-atmosphere, earth-sized planet with 70% water covering. The few thousand people here have a participatory democracy for a government, and they don't allow any weapons on their planet. They seem to be at a World War I tech level. This sounds like a dull place to visit."

"Well," says the referee with a grin, "You discover the sun is a flare star, and radio communication is impossible. When you land, you find the world is populated by telepathic female clones who use high-tech devices purchased from smugglers. Martial arts has replaced hand weapons, and everyone has Brawling-4 skill. The oceans are full of carnivorous monsters that can fly, and a mutant virus in the air turns your skin purple but doesn't otherwise harm you. High-tech clone tanks have produced almost two million people since the last census. Finally, your ship lands during a special celebration in which all off-worlders are captured, given a dagger apiece, and forced to swim a river full of sea monsters. The survivors, if female, are allowed to clone themselves and live on the planet. Furthermore —"

I doubt the players will let you live long enough to continue. But the looks on their faces will make it all worthwhile.