



Traveller5 Review

by Karl Brown

Farhome Sector

Review and Playtest

Part 1: Marquis Jooerah, Interstellar Backpacker

Imperial Secret: The Deep Galaxy 5 mission has detected EM transmissions emanating from approximately 8.2 kiloparsecs from Charted Space. The Transmissions are of a mixed human/sophant culture. While such a discovery may be considered a scientific curiosity there may be extreme political and strategic implications of information gleaned about this distant region of space even if that information is a centuries out of date. Transmissions indicate that this distant branch of humaniti has not had contact with the ?Denizens? but such contact is inevitable. Therefore in the interest of protecting the Imperium contacting this culture is strictly prohibited.

This is the first in a series of articles for Traveller5 (T5). Since there is good back-compatibility between this edition Classic Traveller (T1), Traveller 4, and to a lesser extent Megatraveller and Mongoose Traveller, the materials generated could be used with those editions. The purpose of this series of articles is threefold:

First and foremost the series will be a trial of all the various generation systems in T5 the outputs of which will be new characters, worlds, guns, armour, vehicles, starships, aliens, robots, animals, and gadgets for T5.

Secondly, the series will review T5. Reviews of T5 exist, some are more positive than others (<http://www.penultimateharn.com/blog/?p=122> [1]). A review in Freelance Traveller July 2013 was particularly harsh rating T5 2/5 (available free here: <http://www.freelancetraveller.com/magazine/FT043-201307-ISO-A4.pdf> [2]).

Having worked through character generation, I feel he makes some valid criticisms, however his overall assessment of ?unplayable? and 'not a roleplaying game' is in my opinion very far off the mark. I get the impression that that review was based on hasty read-through. Here I will try out the various systems and review what I found during my test drive.

Finally, a new setting for Traveller will be detailed. Still within the same galaxy as the canonical Third Imperium but many light years distant from Charted Space this new setting will recognizably within the Traveller universe; consistent with, but largely independent of the history of Charted Space presented in canon materials. A miss-jump could place characters from the Imperium into this distant region of space or characters could be locals with no knowledge of the Third Imperium's existence.

The first edition of Traveller was originally conceived as generic rules set for science fiction adventure, the Imperium was developed later. Now in its 5th edition I will discuss how well Traveller still allows for exploration of new worlds outside of the canon setting of Charted Space.

What you get

T5 is a 654 page rugged hardbound book or a pdf. As an object it is very impressive looking and satisfying to hold but I wonder how practical it is. The binding looks like it?s going to be pretty durable despite the huge page count. The pages are thick good quality paper. Contents are largely black and white with a few colour plates added at the end.

The pdf comes on a CD rom containing the core rulebooks for most previous editions of Traveller (as simple scans)

except the GURPS, T20, and Mongoose editions. You also get some nice colour wallpapers and other goodies. Given the bulk of the dead tree version this game lends itself to the convenience of an electronic edition. It is a pity that the pdf is without any bookmarks so you have to rely on thumbnails or page numbers for navigation (which are out of sync because of the covers et al.).

The cover art is a variation on the simple elegant covers of the first edition, black field with bold red and white writing and a red stripe. I like it but it might only appeal to those old fans who were going to buy the book anyway. Using one of the ships from the colour plates at the end might have drawn in new punters. The interior art includes black and white illustrations harvested from old GDW Traveller books or simplistic new line art sometimes mixed together, passable but often lacking any sense of drama. There is some muted colour in these illustrations in the pdf. The colour plates at the back of the book are glorious. Flicking through two things become apparent. There are a lot of tables and diagrams so despite the huge page count you should be able to read the thing in a reasonable amount of time. Secondly, despite the words 'Core Book' the cover and a big '1' on the spine this is not just a core rulebook. It is an entire game line bound in a single cover. The page count is similar to GURPS 3rd edition core book plus GURPS Space, High Tech, Vehicles, Robots, Ultratech, Ultratech 2, Aliens, and Psionics. T5 covers roughly the same kind of scope as this collection of GURPS books. T5 also has plenty of pre-generated weapons, armour, gear etc.

The book is split into seven broad chapters each of which is more like an entire book in scope. These chapters are Introductions, Basic Information, Characters and Life, Combat, Starports and Starships, Stars and Worlds, and Adventures. There is also an appendix of colour pictures of starships. I will rate each chapter separately then find the mean of all the chapter ratings to rate the book at the end of this series of articles.

Introductions

This chapter begins with an appropriate tribute to those who have influenced the development of Traveller but sadly did not live to see this latest incarnation.

After this the chapter launches into some rather inspirational writing about what Traveller is all about supported by well-chosen quotes. When I read this I couldn't help but get excited about the new book and the possibilities it held. After this is a succinct description of what a roleplaying game is. We are then given 'A Brief History of the Universe' (three pages!) that sketches out a setting filled with adventurous opportunities.

The next section 'The Foundations of the Traveller Universe' (p18+) discusses the assumptions made and the rationale behind them as elements to enhance play.

'T5 (T5). The fifth of the direct line of editions of the Traveller game system, ambitiously intended as the ultimate science-fiction role-playing system covering near everything in role-playing, and capable of managing situations across a variety of eras and technology levels.'

So how well does T5 measure up against its own goals?

As noted above Traveller (all editions) makes assumptions. T5 is not a fully generic system with a setting tacked on; it does not cover all possible science fiction settings. If you want that try GURPS 3rd ed. Space. T5 has a lot of assumptions built into its numerous charts and tables. For example FTL works in a particular way, gravitic technology is developed, life-bearing worlds with human compatible biospheres are common, etc. All pretty standard stuff for rather old-fashioned science fiction, much of which is incompatible with current science but familiar from old novels of the 70's and current pop-culture. There is nothing wrong with this; I just want you to know what you are getting. The new setting will embrace T5's assumptions. I might tweak a little around the fringes but more than that is going to be too hard.

Overall, this chapter is the one I enjoyed reading the most so far (I'm about half way through the book as I write this). It does a good job of introducing Traveller and getting this reader enthused about the game.

Basic Information

After the inspiring writing of the Introductions, the Basic Information chapter is thoroughly mind numbingly dull. What a contrast! Despite being told why the chapter is necessary from the get-go I can't shake the feeling that the bulk of this material should have been an appendix at the back. This stuff is important but putting it here ruins the pacing of the book. Unusual units could then be given on a single page near the start of the book. After this, one page about how dice are used and a description of the effect on chances of success would have been justified. The rest could have been an appendix cross-referenced as necessary. The authors and editors really dropped the ball inflicting this on readers so close to the start.

Kludges and Tweaks

I'm going to suggest some kludges and tweaks. Tweaks are not a judgment on the game they are just suggestions to adjust minor details to taste. Kludges are to patch over where T5 fails to give you needed information. Kludges are few and minor but should not exist.

Characters and Life

This chapter covers a lot of ground. Most importantly it includes character generation. Aliens use the same procedures and tables but with a few changes described later in the book. We are told character generation has five broad steps.

1 Birthworld and Homeworld

The first step in character generation is to choose or generate a homeworld where your character grew up. When generating homeworlds 'close' and 'far' refer to moons requiring a roll for the orbit around the primary whereas 'worlds' do not. The homeworld tables do not include Tech level or law level. Tech level is not used in character generation and apparently deliberately left out. Law level is less clear. Without a law level some trade classifications cannot be determined. You can't tell if your character grew up as a stone-age gatherer or with godlike technology. The tables discuss native sophants (aliens) and determine if the population evolved on the world or not. It would have been nice if the other characteristics for the homeworlds were defined here. What does Atmosphere 8 mean? There is not even a cross-reference to a later section.

Tweak: I want my sector to be one where jump drive has only come into use about two centuries ago therefore I'm going to impose a -1 to both population, Government, law and technology rolls (treat negative results as zero).

Kludge: assume law level=government level

I generated a birthworld and homeworld for my character. The birthworld is just background. The homeworld provided a skill based on trade classification.

Glor 567344 star:G9V Lo (characters with Glor as a homeworld gain the Flyer-1 skill, I chose this as a birthworld only)
A temperate world with a tiny transient population.

Imbar 758422 star:K6V2 Ni (Characters with Imbar as a homeworld gain Driver-1 skill)
A temperate world with a tiny population of settlers.

Hidden Past

Eras and Loa are two rather dull worlds within the Farhome sector frequently used as polite cover for hidden pasts.

Eras= E876432-1 Ni Pa G0V Failed colony of iron-age primitives

Loa= D345556-8 Ni Ag G0V Thoroughly unremarkable world with nothing to recommend it.

Future articles will (ok, might) include a random homeworld table for the sector (like that on p82).

Date of Birth

The civilization of the Farhome Sector is completely unaware of the Third Imperium and its calendar. Here the current

calendar dates to the discovery of jump drive just over two centuries ago, the default starting year is 210SF (starfaring). The Standard Year is assumed to be near enough to that used in T5 as to make no difference. A Far Home character's date of birth is a day number between 1 and 364. The year is based on the orbit of the capital world adjusted to exactly 26 standard 'jumps' of 14 days each. There are two jumps to a 'journey'. The capital world has no moon and therefore natives have no months.

2 Personal Characteristics

This section is really straightforward. Perhaps a little too much for current taste. Your personal characteristics (attributes) are determined completely randomly, for humans 2d6 for each in the order rolled.

For my character I rolled: 78B45B

Characteristics for humans are Strength (Str), Dexterity (Dex), Endurance (End), Intelligence (Int), Education (Edu), and Social Standing (Soc). Aliens might have alternate characteristics so sometime characteristics are referred to by position, C1 is Str. My character is physically average except for high endurance (B) possibly because he's too stupid to know when to stop (Int4). He is from the upper Social Standing (SocB) but poorly educated. In short idle rich. Sir Jaim Jooerah is born.

What's with the B's? Like previous editions of Traveller, T5 substitutes letters for numerals over 9, B=11.

I also recorded the first die of each of the first four my characters in-game 'genetics' 3661. This is optional but can be used later to create offspring, parents, and clones. You can create Traveller campaigns that cover a lot of game time. You could create a campaign on a slower than light generation ship epic with one new solar system visited every generation.

Tweak: You might let players roll six pairs of dice then assign them as pairs as they wish.

3 Pre-Career Education (and Training)

Like any good member of the upper classes Jaim applies for Naval Academy. It is a little unclear but you use the college table for this (I think). Rolled '5?', equal to education to get in, just made it. As in Classic Traveller there are major random elements to character creation. Just because you envision playing a dashing Space Navy Officer does not mean that is the character you end up with. Personally, I really enjoy rolling Traveller characters but think that not letting players design the character they envision is a downside of the game.

Tweak: you might let players begin with the following list of results: 1,1,2,2,3,3,4,4,5,5,6,6. At any point where a roll is called for the player may substitute (and cross off) one of these preordained results instead before rolling the dice. Careful use of preordained results will guide the generation process producing a result close to the player's character concept.

Anyway I kept rolling. Jaim passes on his first year but fails his second. Fortunately, being of the upper classes has benefits and Jaim receives a waiver (p72) by rolling under Soc. The same thing happens on his third year. When Jaim fails his fourth year the Naval College has had enough and kicks his upper class behind out of their school. Jaim does not leave empty handed his one pass gets him a major in 'Leader'. For a minor the list says I can choose 'any Starship skill'. A page reference to the list of Starship skills would have been nice (p142) but instead I spent five minutes flicking through the book (no index). Jaim chooses Pilot.

4 Career

T5 character generation is dominated by career choice. Unlike the core book of some previous Traveller editions both military and civilian careers are covered. Also unlike earlier editions, you are allowed to switch careers during character generation. I really like the thinking behind the careers. Every career is a little different and each captures a main theme of that life well. Scholars strive for publications and tenure, marines risk injury and are rewarded for courage, entertainers seek fame etc. To use the tables you really need to read the section carefully first. The checklists for each career on p78-78 are essential to make sense of the career tables. It would have been nice if the one page of tables per career were more self-contained, perhaps as a double page spread.

Jaim decides to give up his boyhood dream, stop wasting time, and follow his parents into politics. Having Soc A (10) he is automatically accepted. In other careers a failed roll to start ages the character a year. He can use his high endurance for the intrigue roll giving him a good chance of advancement. Jaim works long hours outmaneuvering other noble's schemes, has patience, and is known for filibustering. His chances of elevation to higher Soc are good. I spend all my skill rolls for the first three terms on characteristics hoping to raise Jaim's abysmal Int and Edu. Interestingly, you can improve Soc via skill rolls as well as elevation. Aware of his poor education Jaim embarks on a program of self-improvement spending time in the gym and at the net terminal

Term 1

99D55c Age 26 1 Intrigue, Elevated, Land Grant, no change to skills: Driver-1, Pilot-1, Leader-1.

Here's a trip be careful with increases to Social Standing, some levels are subdivided e.g. ?c? and ?C?.

Term 2

A9D66C Age 30 Intrigues:2, Land Grants:2, Skills: Driver-1, Pilot-1, Leadership-1.

Term 3

Before aging:

B9E68D Age 30 Intrigues:3, Elevated (I use up his once-in-a-lifetime flux (1d6-1d6) roll), Land Grants:4, Skills: Driver-1, Pilot-1, Leader-1.

After aging: A9D68D

Term 4

Jaim realizes his pursuit of general improvement has left him with few marketable skills. He works over the next four years to change this. He also begins to understand that he has reached the highest social position he is ever likely to attain.

Intrigues 4, Land Grants 3, Skills: Programmer-1, Leader-2, Liason-1, Pilot-2, Driver-1

After aging: Age 34, 98C68D

5 Mustering out

This is the last step of the 5 steps for character generation.

Mustering out: Life Insurance 2, C4+1, StarPass (this is like an interstellar ?round the world plane ticket).

Jaim has received some benefits for his years of service to the realm but has failed to adequately plan for his early retirement; thus finds himself embarrassingly short of liquidity. It's quite possible for a character to start with nothing but (presumably) the clothes on his back and no cash. Fortunately he can afford to take risks to earn money, life insurance-2 means that he can be restored to life in a clone body if killed twice. The mustering out benefits assume a particular kind of interstellar economy, that particular kinds of organizations exist (like the providers of a StarPass), that at least some worlds in your campaign have pretty high technology, and that things like growing a clone body and downloading your personality into it are legal. Traveller really assumes a lot and this limits the kind of setting it can portray easily.

Tweak: PCs who gain no cash during mustering out are awarded C6x100 credits. In humans C6 is Social Standing. With the tweak Jaim has 1200 credits to his name.

I decide to determine the optional Fame rating for Jaim. First I have to find the table (no index). Not having earned any fame during his career Jaim has a Fame of zero, the lowest possible. With nothing to lose I use up his once-in-a-lifetime flux (1d6-1d6) roll to adjust fame. I roll -2, Jaim still has the minimum of Fame-0.

He also has land grants. Like aging, these seem like a bit of a mystery at first but as you continue to read through you find a page on Noble Lands (p96). Jaim has:

2 hexes on homeworld

2 hexes on a Pre-Ag(ricultural) or Pre-Ri(ch) world in his home system

4 hexes elsewhere on his homeworld.

4 hexes on an Ag or Ri world in his home system.

8 more hexes on his homeworld.

8 hexes on a Pre-Ind(ustrial) world elsewhere in the subsector.

At the end of the year these generate an income. It is not clear if Jaim starts with any land grant income from previous

years but I would guess not. The exact value of this income depends on the world trade classifications. These vary greatly and players might game the system to get more valuable estates. No system is given to determine which world non-homeworld land grants are on. Kludge: I'd recommend player choice with referee veto. I'll generate Jaim's Land Grant worlds later.

As part of mustering out some careers can get shares in a starship. The idea that characters can pool shares to get a better ship will give game backing to a shared history for some characters. I really like this. However the details of ship shares are unclear. If characters pool shares do they all need to meet the eligibility criteria for the ship or only one of them? We are told some ship's are actually loaned while others are owned by the characters but not which ships. It would seem obvious that military corvette is a loan and a yacht is owned but what about a lab ship? Might it be owned by an university or government?

Kludge: any 'Naval' or 'Scout' ship is a loan. All others are owned.

Jaim Joohra

Frustrated by the prospect of not being able to advance further Jaim Joohra makes any early retirement to 'get out and see the galaxy'. With his StarPass but few credits and little in the way of marketable skills Marquis Jaim Joohra is something of an interstellar backpacker.

98C78D

Skills: Programmer-1, Leader-2, Liason-1, Pilot-2, Driver-1

Gear: Life Insurance 2, C4+1, StarPass.

Life Events

These tables are not discussed in the main text or character generation checklists. It is pretty obvious though that they just generate 'fluff' to fill out the character's back-story. I like that there is a table for each profession. For Jaim I determine he was involved in the following intrigues:

The Browlmon Commission

Vortloom's Palace

The Grashant Commission

Harlron's Misconduct

Secrets

After life events there are two tables of Secrets by Career. Most careers might gain secrets during mustering out. I can't find anywhere in the Noble career where the character acquires a secret.

Kludge: When a Wafer Jack is acquired during mustering out Nobles may optionally choose a Secret instead.

Thoughts on character generation

Characters are complete with a sketch of their back-story full of hooks for roleplaying. However, because generation is largely random there is little chance of reproducing a desired concept as a PC. It is annoying that you have no idea what level of technology is available on their homeworld.

At this point I thought my character was finished.

Reading Ahead

Character generation is part of the chapter 'Characters and Life'. The section dealing with character generation is entitled 'Characters'. On a first-read-through it is not really clear where character generation ends. This section should have been called 'Character Generation'. The sections that follow cover experience, then other material related to characters (genetics, clones, and synthetic humanoids) that would have been better put in a separate chapter (as was done for robots and aliens). As things stand the layout is a little confusing on a casual read-through but the logic does become clear soon after you start to use the rules.

Life Pursuits and Experience

This section begins with players defining life pursuits for their characters. This feels like a character generation activity; another source of confusion for those reading through the book. Life Pursuits grant a +1 for related activities. Life pursuits are not used in the experience system as I expected making their placement in a separate section to character generation more of a mystery. For Jaim Joohra I design new life pursuits:

Life Pursuit

Flaneur: An idle rich interstellar explorer of streets and cultures

Streetwise. Social Standing. C+S=12

Even though Jaim has no Streetwise skill his SocD (13) qualifies him for this pursuit. T5 advises ?Most characters should have three or four life pursuits? (p110) so lets make a couple more.

Life Pursuit

Distance Runner

Athlete. Endurance C+S=12

As a second life pursuit the C+S=13 for Jaim so I need to switch the order here so that Flaneur C+S=13 and Distance Runner C+S=12.

Life Pursuit

Travel Writer

Knowledge Travel Destinations . Education . C+S=12 (actually 14 for Jaim)

Secondary Skill: Author.

This last life pursuit is worth discussing a little more. Firstly, I could not find a skill to cover the pursuit, there is an Author skill but this wasn't quite right. Fortunately, T5 has knowledges that can be created to cover this kind of thing. Given that an example is Knowledge in a specific world I felt I needed something more focused than Knowledge , hence Travel Destinations. The rules also say that optional secondary skills can be added but what effect these have, if any, is not stated. Jaim does not meet the requirement for this, as his second pursuit the requirement is actually 13 not twelve. Jaim has Int7 and no ranks in the knowledge. Fortunately, the system allows you to choose one Life Pursuit you are not qualified for as a hobby. Jaim maintains a thoroughly mediocre travel blog.

It's at this point I get a nagging feeling that I have not seen any opportunities to gain knowledges. Again the lack of an index slows down my hunt. I eventually find instructions for determining a character's knowledges in the Skills section. This information really should have been somewhere near the front of the instructions for generating characters. In fact there are several items added to characters in the Skills section that should have been included in the character generation section:

- 1) Knowledges instead of low levels of some specific skills (p144).
- 2) Hobby: a skill not normally a default at zero (p143). (Jaim has Seafarer-0).
- 3) Knowledge equal to number of terms in career.
- 4) World Knowledges equal to (years lived there)/4.

I already know that Jaim was born on the world of Glor but grew up on Imbar. In his last term Jaim was awarded land on a Pre-Industrial world (Lanth) elsewhere in the subsector. I decide to divide up Jaim's 8 levels of World knowledges among these. Note that the maximum for any knowledge is 6.

Some knowledges are subskills, you can use them like a skill but within a narrower focus. Not all skills have knowledges but where they do the initial ranks in those skills only grant the skill at zero and ranks in a narrower knowledge. Again this is something that should be explained near the beginning of character generation. I have to go back and alter my character Jaim Jooerah, two of Jaim's skills (Pilot and Drive) have knowledges. This use of knowledges gives characters specializations, a knowledge is additive to the skill where it applies. For example Jaim has Drive-0 to drive a tracked tank his skill is 0, not great but better than unskilled. However to drive a wheeled truck Jaim adds his Wheeled-1, 0+1=1.

After this tinkering Jaim looks like this:

98C78D

Skills: Programmer-1, Leader-2, Liason-1, Spacecraft ACS-2, Wheeled-1, Pilot-0, Drive-0, Seafarer-0, Career Noble-4,

Glor-1, Imbar-6, Lanth-1.

Gear: Life Insurance 2, C4+1, StarPass.

Having completed the diversion to the skills section I return to Life Pursuits and Experience. Next up in this section are ?Certificates? which are a game mechanic covering qualifications. I really don?t think this rather complicated rule this adds much to the game. The example use given is when PCs interview to hire an NPC. A better way to do this would be a simple Flux (d6-d6) roll applied to the NPCs skill to represent ?paper? qualifications and go from there. For PCs just assuming that PCs have appropriate certification for their skill levels would be sufficient for most gaming groups.

Finally, we reach Experience. This is a departure from Classic Traveller which was notable for not having an experience system. I was hoping for something like the experience system from Megatraveller that encouraged groups to give PCs with lower skill levels the opportunity to make critical rolls. I expected the experience system to use Life Pursuits, it doesn?t. The ?system? is simply granting a skill level every year.

Assessment to date.

T5 begins with a great chapter introducing the game. However, the authors do not seem to appreciate the importance of maintaining enthusiasm in their readers. The writing is mostly logical, concise, but cold making it hard to keep up the momentum if I?m tired. Perhaps this is why early reviewers have been less than enthused about T5. However, I?m very impressed by the scope of the material. A science fiction universe has more diversity than a typical rpg fantasy setting. You need some clear way of defining all those aliens, gadgets, vehicles, worlds, and spaceships in game terms; you need help when inspiration runs dry. A good science fiction game needs generation rules. T5 has all the generation rules you will ever need. You could buy this one book then play T5 every weekend of your life and not exhaust the possibilities. This looks like value for money.

Overall I?m both and excited and disappointed in this game. I?m excited about the possibilities and completeness of this very complete science fiction rpg. I like how character generation works when you actually use it, rather than just read it. I hope the other systems in the book are also a joy to use when I come to try them out. I am excited about the scope of this book and the years of entertainment it might offer if you can endure reading it. I wish that most of the writing did not read like a mathematics textbook. They also should have taken a little more time and ironed out the few holes that make house rule kludges necessary. Should you buy a copy? At this point I?d give a guarded ?yes?. I?ll hold off on a firm answer until I?ve played with the game more.

Chapter scores out of 5:

The Thing, Hardcover: 3 (would be 4 if they had put in an index)

The Thing, PDF file: 2

Introductions: 5

Basic Information: 2

Characters and Life: see next article.

Coming up

Items you might see in upcoming articles include:

1. Generate full details for the worlds named and on which Jaim has land grants.
2. Play-testing of all the other generation systems.
3. Further development of the Farhome setting.
4. Take it to the table and play!
5. Final evaluation.

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