Travelling Light

by Paul Elliott

"Specific throws for specific situations must be generated. Obviously, some throws will be harder than others, and many will be impossible without an accumulation of DMs based on expertise, education, dexterity, intelligence and the availability of parts and tools."
- Classic Traveller, Book One

The task resolution in Classic Traveller has always had its critics; unfocussed, dependent on referee judgement, and fairly arbitrary from one task to the next. But it is also a useful tool. Referee judgement is used to come up with a task number, a suitable skill, one or more characteristics that may impinge on the task, plus any other Die Modifiers (DMs) that might affect the outcome. I liked this free and easy approach. Attempts have been made over the years to create a single unified task system for Classic Traveller, and the most famous and most well liked was the Digest Group's UTS 8+ mechanic. I didn't like it. It was lifeless and boring and reduced characteristics down to fifths ... not really in the spirit of Classic Traveller.

The method I outline below I grandly call the Formalised Book One Task Resolution, and it changes Classic Traveller (CT) as little as possible but puts a little bit (and I mean a little bit) of structure onto the resolution mechanics already outlined in Book One's skill descriptions.

My aim isn't to create a realistic fix for Traveller, but one that changes as little as possible, and that provides some identifiable structure for referees to work with. My guiding principle was to have a skilled individual always outperform an unskilled individual, however 'talented' (ie. Dexterous or Intelligent) he is.

Referee Decision Making

As with most CT task checks, the player will be rolling 2D and must try to equal or exceed a target number created by the referee. The referee decides on the difficulty of the task on a scale from 2 to 15; 3 is easy, 7 is moderate (avoiding red tape, for example), 9 difficult (perhaps landing a spacecraft in bad weather), 13 formidable, and 15 virtually impossible. He must also decide on a skill or skills that will prove relevant, as well as one characteristic that might help the player character in his task attempt.

Adding the DMs Up

Next the player rolls the 2D and adds the value of the relevant skill. He also gains a bonus of +1 if his relevant characteristic equals or exceeds the task difficulty. In fact, if his characteristic is *double* the difficulty, then he gains a DM of +2 instead! When the

DMs are added up, a result equal to or exceeding the referee's difficulty number is a success - just like in Book One.

Unskilled Penalties

Many of the skill descriptions in Book One give hefty penalties for attempting a task while untrained (i.e. with no relevant skill levels). How does the FBOTR handle this aspect? Default skills are those skills that the characters are assumed to be familiar with if not fully trained, skills like Vacc Suit, weapon skills, ground car, etc. As in Book One, default skill gives a DM of 0. Carry on ...

For other skills the referee must decide on their value (how rare or specialized they are). Is that skill you've requested fairly common, or is it rare? Examples of the first might be Steward, Electronics, or ATV (skills quite familiar to most characters through everyday experiences). Examples of the second include Engineering, Pilot, Forward Observer, Streetwise, Leadership, and so on (specialized skills requiring specific education or experiences to understand and attempt).

Apply a DM of -2 for lack of a common skill

Apply a DM of -4 for lack of a specialised skill

Using Two Skills in Combination

Some tasks call for skill in two different areas. Turning a missile into a drone might require both Gunnery *and* Electronics. If the referee calls for two skills that must both be possessed, then he must also double the difficulty he just set and allow the main skill to add a DM of +2 to per skill level, and the secondary skill to add the usual +1 per skill level. If the character lacks just one of the two required skills then assume to be at a default level for this task (receiving no untrained penalty). If you lack both required skills then you receive only one untrained penalty (whichever is the harshest). For example, if Pilot and Vacc Suit are required, you'd get a -4 penalty for having neither skill, not the full -6.

Example One

Lazlo (no Vacc Suit training, Dex 7) and Peterson (Vacc Suit-3, Dex 3) are trying to climb a rocky slope without damaging their suits. The referee sets the difficulty at 6 (moderate). Lazlo's Dex is higher than 6 and he receives a +1 DM, as well as a -2 DM for lack of any skill (even default). He rolls 2D -1 for a target of 6 or more. Peterson's Dex is lower than 6 so he receives no DM, but he does gain a DM of +3 for his skill. There is no penalty for being unskilled. He rolls 2D +3 for a target of 6 or more.

This example illustrates that although Peterson has a Dex of 3, it is his Vacc Suit-3 training which counts. If I remember correctly 'Marc Miller's Traveller' (also known as T4) added the characteristic value (averaging 7) to the skill which skewed the odds in favour of the higher characteristic by a very noticeable margin. Classic Traveller was always a skills game and in my mind should stay that way.

Example Two

Major Teller (Computer-2, Electronics-1, Int 8) is trying to program software to give itself a catastrophic virus in 36 hours. The referee sets the difficulty at 8. Teller's Int is at 8 and so he receives a DM of +1 as well as a +2 DM for his skill. There is no penalty for being unskilled. He rolls 2D +3 for a target of 8 or more. Next he needs to use both of his skills. Teller wants to fix a retina print ID lock. The referee assigns it a difficulty of 7 and requires Computer as the primary skill and Electronics as the secondary. Because two skills are *required*, the referee doubles the difficulty to 14 or more. Teller gains a DM of +1 for his Int (we compare that to the original difficulty value), +4 for his Computer skill and +1 for his Electronics. He rolls 2D +6 for a target of 14 or more.

And as far as the task resolution is concerned, that's it. Short and sweet. All I've really done is created an established and invisible system for incorporating personal characteristics. I think it works quite well.

Broad Skills, Basic Chargen

In the same manner I've tried to correct a similarly 'perceived error' in the character creation process. The Classic Traveller Book One rules allow character generation using one of six different career paths and a handful of skills. Later books (specifically Book 4, 5, 6 and 7) enlarge on these careers with greater detail and a much more realistic spread of skills. Using the Book One rules, for example, it was impossible to create an Army veteran with any knowledge of weaponry bigger than an automatic rifle. Book 4 and its cousins provided all of these missing skills, but character creation using the extended systems typically took an hour or two. Since one of the beautiful things about Classic Traveller is that characters can be created incredibly quickly, players have to make a choice: fast but unrealistically skilled (Scouts without Survival training, or Merchants without Trader skill) or the prolonged, year by year determination of a suitably skilled character.

Thinking long and hard about this, I noticed that the four essential skill tables listed with each career in the basic chargen system is in some shape or form duplicated in its extended system. And these other tables include all of the new and useful skills. I suggest a simple transposition of these key extended skill tables into the basic character generation system. It's as simple as that. Authenticity is retained, because we're utilising 'canon' resources, only shifted to another area of the game. This is the kind of approach I'm trying to push here.

In the plethora of tables and lists, which are these? For anyone wanting to try this, here are the tables:

Personal Development Table - Use the Army Life, Marine Life, Merchant Life, Navy Life or Scout Life as appropriate.

Service Table - Use a chosen (by the player) Office, Department, Branch or Arm Table as appropriate. An Army character might select Artillery, for example, and thus roll on the Artillery table instead of the Service Table thereafter.

Advanced Education (i) - Use the NCO, Petty Officer, Field, Shipboard Life or Officer skill table as appropriate.

Advanced Education (ii) - Select the Command or Staff table as desired from term to term, the Admin Rank table for Scouts, or the Master's Skills for a Merchant.

Special assignments (Commando School, Attache, etc.) play a part in the acquisition of suitable skills and I would allow a single die roll at each re-enlistment, with a result of '6' indicating a special assignment at some point in the last four years. To ensure a fairly even number of skills per character I recommend that a special assignment only give the character one extra skill point (perhaps chosen from those offered, or the first one in the list). The referee might allow the other skills listed for a special assignment to be picked up as 'default' (level - 0) skills.

Of course there are an endless number of tweaks you could carry out on this sytem, but it should stand up quite well. One thing that does need attention is the use of enlisted ranks as DM's on the extended system skill tables, particularly because the basic Book One system has no enlisted ranks. One solution is to assume promotion of two enlisted ranks in every four year term. A 22 year old Marine will probably be a Private or Lance Corporal (E1 or E2), a 26 year old Marine will be a Corporal or Lance Sergeant (E3 or E4), and so on.

Happy Travelling!

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