

Predicting Society's Responses To New Situations, Part 1

In world building we are always thinking up new circumstances and scenarios and asking “How will people respond to this?” I will call this “Situation X”, i.e., any situation or event that warrants people responding to it: a work strike, declaration of war, a technological breakthrough, the discovery of a new continent or tribe—whatever. The focus here is on broad-scale social reactions: not the response of a single individual, but how a society or culture as a whole reacts to Situation X.

What are “acceptable” responses to new challenges and situations?

Once we grapple with Situation X and try to determine responses, this quickly takes us into the realm of predicting human (or perhaps non-human) reactions to complex or novel situations. As we navigate this maze, we create chains of consequence that can profoundly affect our ongoing development of that setting.

There is a problem here, though, for many world builders. Namely, it is too easy for our responses to Situation X to be reflexive or glib, based on how we think today and what we as individuals know of our own history and culture up to this point. We too often predict that the humans and societies in our fictional setting will behave just as our contemporaries or historical role models have behaved.

This isn't such a bad thing if your setting is based on an analog of an Earth culture, and you have a good feel for where that society is at in its development. That knowledge can provide you with a useful shorthand for predicting “how people will respond to X.” If your equivalent of the Spanish Empire, say, has discovered a new continent and decided to forcefully convert the locals to the Empire's religion and exploit the natural resources, you could reasonably predict brutality and a pattern of conversion-or-slaughter that mirrors what occurred in our own timeline.[1]

And yet, this is not the only pattern that is possible in your invented culture. Unless you are intent on emulating Earth history, there are actually many important questions and design decisions packed into the basic query, “How will these conquerors treat this new land?” (Or more generically, “How will people respond to Situation X?”) We'll get more into this subject below, but first let's pause at the brink of an even bigger design pitfall. It is this:

The Past is Not Always Prelude

We slide quickly onto thin ice if we take the “humans historically acted like this” approach to predicting far-future responses (as in much of science fiction), or if the culture is not a direct analog of Earth but has developed along its own unique lines.

Past Behavior Does Not Predict Future Behavior

The actions of one group of humans (our ancestors, in our historical events) is not a reliable roadmap to the actions of another, different group of humans in different circumstances. Some people argue that humans are always exploitative, aggressive, greedy, and so on (whatever blanket adjectives suit you to describe human nature) and therefore, given situation X, they will always respond in Y manner. Given a vulnerable local population to exploit, the Spaniards will always conquer, convert and/or kill.

What is overlooked here is that (to take the example at hand) the Spaniards are an example of a group of people in a culture with a set of unique social mores and constraints in force at a given point in time. ***Their behaviors are not universal, but specific to the circumstances and society in which they find themselves.*** Be humans ever so “aggressive” or “exploitative” as a pattern, that alone does not explain or predict the behavior of the Spaniards colonizing South America.

How people act in Situation X is largely dependent upon that situation and their cultural framework that defines what they think of as possible, permissible, and forbidden.

In Spanish culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, it was an accepted attitude to think of primitive non-Europeans as ignorant savages, close to animals in nature and intelligence. Once dehumanized in this manner, treating those “savages” inhumanely was an easy step to take. Whipping an indigenous person was no different than whipping a dog. This made behaviors permissible that would have been unthinkable had they been directed at fellow Europeans.

In short, the range of possible Spanish actions in colonial South America was shaped by their cultural attitudes and what their society allowed, and did not allow, at that time and in those circumstances. . This set of social mores, social control, and prejudice is very era- and culturally dependent. In a different period, with different cultural sensibilities, the range of permissible behaviors would have been different as well.

The same principle applies when looking at any group dealing with a “Situation X.”

How Does This Relate to World Building?

To get a more accurate handle on how fictional cultures are likely to respond to new circumstances and events, we have to resist the urge to simply project our own sensibilities onto that culture. Instead, it is useful to think through some meta-issues about the culture and people in question.

Defining Cultural Assumptions

- The biggest meta-question to resolve first is, what are the assumptions (often unspoken) that are foundational for the society in question?
- What do these people know as “true” (and probably unquestionable) in their culture?
- How do these underpinnings shape expected behaviors?
- What is acceptable to do or think in this culture, and what is considered forbidden?

Defining Attitudes

After we've given some thought to these framing questions, then it is time to take things down to a more detailed level and look at specifics of Situation X. In thinking about Europeans colonizing other continents, for instance, questions like this come to mind:

- Is the society open to strangers or leery of them? (This applies to both natives and newcomers.)
- Is genocide an acceptable approach for clearing a new territory of native life forms?
- Is trade or capitalism a cultural priority? If not, what is?
- Does this require that newcomers will establish friendly communications and engage in economic exchange? Or may they impose their will by force?

--And so on.

Assumptions are easier to define when thinking of a culture as a whole. Attitudes are a little easier to define when you frame them in response to a specific situation. Assumptions and attitudes may also be closely linked. For instance, if our assumption is that most strangers we meet are hostile, then our attitude of suspicion and wariness towards strangers is well founded. Both of these aspects will color our interactions with outsiders.

In any case, you should also develop your own questions to add to these lists. The end result is a set of general “cultural rules” that help determine how this society will respond to new situations. (I'll give an example of this process in Part 2 of this series next week.) I consider these meta-questions because they deal with high-level issues and must be determined before you can reasonably predict how your people will react to a certain situation. Whatever you come up with here will shape the responses likely to occur in Situation X.

You may already know these things intuitively, or have them in the back of your mind, but spelling them out gives you a yardstick that you can apply to many “Situation Xs” and not have to fly by the seat of your pants each time.

To see how these questions work in practice, consider the case of the colonizing Spaniards. Their Situation X was “discovery of a new land.” To this they brought a dominant paradigm of “God brought us to a bountiful land to exploit,” in combination with a religious and non-humanitarian attitude of “if natives convert, we'll tolerate them; if not, we have no use for them.” Together, these attitudes led to forced conversion, slaughter, and slave-like exploitation of people for labor and resources.

Yet other outcomes could have been possible, if the cultural questions had had different answers. In a different world, “become equal trade and diplomatic partners” might have been a cultural imperative. Or if Spanish society placed a high premium on “brotherly love and equality in the eyes of God,” rather than giving this lip-service only, this too would have created a different outcome.

The more you define social attitudes and cultural constraints, the more the responses to

Situation X will make sense within the framework of that society. The more you do this, the more your world and characters will behave as a native part of the culture you are developing. They will not just be transplanted historical Earthlings reacting in predictable and tiresome ways to your fictional setting.

In Part 2 of this Advanced Topic series, we'll look at a brief world building example of developing cultural assumptions and attitudes, and applying them to a particular Situation X.

1. This is a notorious chapter in Spanish and Catholic Church history which arguably could not recur today (if South America were newly discovered) because of changed cultural sensibilities over the last 500 years. Which is, in fact, the point of this post. Yet the shadow of the past continues to be addressed through the more enlightened perspective of today. See related article: [Pope Concedes Unjustifiable Crimes in Converting South Americans](#)

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