

The Alternate History Challenge in World Building

I enjoy alternate history and do world building in that vein as well. I've been thinking about some of the challenges alt history presents a world builder.

Most people think of this genre as as "one historical event happened differently in our past, resulting in a divergent timeline." I will point out here that this is not the only kind of alternate history that there is. In fact, I have identified four different types and written about them in some detail elsewhere (see footnote for links). For the purposes of the present discussion, however, I'll focus on this one style I just mentioned: an historical event turns out differently, thus resulting in a different future.

So what does this mean for the world builder?

First, this kind of story or game setting can be relatively easy to develop, up to a point. If the events that occur are a mirror of our real history, the world building is already done for you. You are using an historical model. Let's take, for example, a Civil War-era story where, say, Abraham Lincoln is not assassinated. As to the way the world works, we already have reams of reference material about that era. In this sense, the world builder's task is the same as that of any historical novelist: to show what you need on the page that conveys the sense of that world. You do not need to invent anything from scratch, or even work hard to extrapolate how things were. This is a crafty exercise of picking which details to highlight, not of determining those details in the first place.

So where does the "world building work" come in? In this scenario, it happens in the social and political sphere, after Abraham Lincoln continues to live. Here, you must become familiar with actual historical events and then pose yourself the question: how would this have played out differently if Lincoln were alive?

Social or Tech?

In this case we would probably focus on political changes, and then the social impacts that fall out of that. Here we have a "social science" work of prognostication to do, in deciding what the world will look like following the thwarted assassination attempt. Reconstruction might not have unfolded as rapaciously as it did, and Jim Crow laws might not have taken root in the same way, and so on.

The possibilities are many, but the civilization in which they take place will be essentially the same (culturally speaking) as it was before the lynchpin historical event occurred.

The alternative scenario would be one in which technological change happens. The inciting incident that alters a timeline would be different in that case, impacting things with technological consequences. For instance, perhaps the Germans are the first to get atomic capability in WWII, changing not only military history but the path of technological development for all

countries involved.

What kind of changes occur after a divergent history event are of course for you the world builder to decide, but I suggest that because of its power to force disruptive change, it is the technological changes that will have the most evident and wide-reaching impact on the world.

Naturally there would also be political and social consequences to figure as well, but the most radical differences might first be visible in the realm of technology. More so than social changes, which tend to evolve out of a fabric of complex systems, technology can force sharp and abrupt change that is most disruptive--or even destructive--where people are unprepared for it. There are fewer checks and balances in the social fabric to keep that genie in a bottle. Imagine a Dark Ages setting, for instance, where (for some reason) they manage to harness electricity. Even if this is just in the form of (relatively simple to make) batteries--how will it be used? What other changes, both tech and social, would this compel?

Easiest Path Might Not Be Best Path

My conclusion here is that radical technological change is easier for the world builder to map out, precisely because it is such a sharp departure from things that came before. The implications are more obvious. Is it easier to imagine the shocking (haha) consequences of electricity in an 8th century society? Or is it easier to think through the social changes that would follow on the heels of, say, a change in inheritance practices among the nobility of Wales in that same era?

I suspect the tech chain of consequences is easier to be creative about. Elaborating on the effects of social change requires more homework, I believe, and probably more finesse to do it well.



The pitfall here is that we may grasp to the easy and obvious (such as startling tech differences)

and shortchange the social -- which, if we are honest, are also very bound up in the impacts of technology. If you substitute "magic" for "technology" in that statement, then we arrive at that crippled rpg trope of magic-rich worlds with no obvious social effects from having all that magic around.

Ultimately, to create a well-rounded world, we need to think about both of these aspects (social and tech/magic). And we also need to think about how they act upon each other, to create a fully fleshed out society. This is one of the downfalls of many steampunk settings: beyond the bells and whistles of the intriguing gadgetry, there is often little thought given to how steamtech actually affects people's lives, their behavior, and social mores. This all requires that we sit down and actually ask ourselves: how would life and society be different, given this set of circumstances?

This is an important question for building any world, but maybe especially for alt-historical ones, where our manner of thought already tends a certain way based on the world as we know it to have been.

My essay series on alternate history at Alternate History Weekly Update:

[Points of Divergence: Frameworks of Alternate History](#)

[Points of Divergence 2: The Long Tail](#)

[Points of Divergence 3: The Butterfly Effect](#)

[Points of Divergence 4: Different Rules](#)