

How to Use Socioeconomic Class in RPGs, Part 1

I've been blogging recently about how seldom the dynamics of historical socioeconomic classes really show up in our fiction and role-playing games. Modern writers, it seems, tend to homogenize out the differences that in earlier times were central to self identity and social tensions. Without awareness of the different mindsets that prevailed in earlier times, it is all too easy to produce settings that are simply egalitarian reflections of our current world with token elitism thrown in for flavor. (You can see those posts [here](#) and [here](#). The series will conclude with a forthcoming Part 3.)

In a discussion spawned by this topic, a netizen opined that to interject class consciousness as it once existed would be to introduce into play all the despicable -isms (sexism, racism, elitism, etc) that modern players do not like and do not want to emulate in their games. Another reflected that these class issues are most easily handled by simply making PCs all of the same socioeconomic level (thus removing most of the need to distinguish class within the group), and/or to put PCs in situations where their surroundings are not congruent with their social class (throwing peasants among the nobles, for instance), which creates lots of role-playing and story opportunities.

I think the outworkings of class in rpgs should be both more subtle and more pervasive than a simplification to prejudice on one hand, or reliance on in-your-face class contrasts on the other. These and similar approaches are easy to implement because they are one-dimensional. They also do not begin to scratch the surface of the richness and challenges a real class orientation can bring to play.

The benefit of adding class distinctions to your game setting and role-playing is that it adds immeasurably to the flavor and feel of the world, while at the same time increasing the opportunity for good drama and conflict. It takes some work, though, to do this in a way that is not over-simplified, overly complex, or merely tokenistic.

The Different Needs of RPGs

In a work of fiction a writer can selectively focus on whatever elements further the story, but in a role-playing game, where much of the ambiance is created by the players themselves, part of the challenge is to impart to those players the personal experience their characters are having, including whatever class consciousness would naturally be in their mindset and how this is reflected in the world around them. This requires rather different techniques in tabletop gaming than in written storytelling. Here, then, are some thoughts on introducing socioeconomic class into rpgs.

(Incidentally, although "class" in rpgs is commonly used to refer to "character class", in this post I'll be using the word as shorthand for socioeconomic class or its acronym, SEC.)

I think the bottom line to adding class layers to a game setting is, it needs to be interwoven into

the fabric of society, and the players made aware of the expectations/obligations that either hem their characters in or open doors for them. Then, when society is defied, that's when the fun begins. In the alternative, too (depending on the setting), I've seen PCs take the societal strictures very much to heart and try to live up fully to the letter and spirit of the class obligations they are born into. Now that makes for some fascinating role playing. I've seen that happen most frequently with my [Sa'adani Empire](#) science fiction rpg (the backdrop for my sf novels). That culture is a caste-and-class conscious, rather 'bushido-tinged' setting. I've had players routinely take on their own and their family's challenges in this setting and try to improve fortunes, restore lost glory, repair damaged honor, and so on, by delving deep into their class and status and using those attributes to best advantage.

Whatever route one takes, it requires that some groundwork be laid so that class dynamics can be brought into play.

Some Ways to Introduce Class Identity into Play

In an earlier post I suggested the GM or writer do a mental exercise to create a very acute awareness of what is expected of a given class: its obligations, duties, privileges, what is allowed to it, and what is forbidden. The remarks that follow assume that the GM is clear on the boundaries and nature of class in her world, or at least has a clear vision of the type of societal strictures and opportunities tied to class that she wants to introduce. If this is a gray area for you, I recommend the writing exercise discussed [here](#) under "Class Consciousness" as a warm-up for what follows.

The Characteristics of Class

In class-based societies, the signifiers of class are readily recognized by everyone. Hairstyle and clothes are very telling factors, and although they can be changed, other attributes are equally identifying and less easily altered. One's accent and diction can proclaim "ditch digger!" as well as "nobleman!", quite aside from anything else, and if that well-dressed man opens his mouth and sounds like a ditch digger, he's going to raise a lot of suspicion. A large part of his presentation is signaling "I'm not the class I appear to be."

For players who like to run ruses and scams and trick their way into places, it might be worthwhile to remember the movie [My Fair Lady](#) and the great lengths the good Professor Higgins went through to teach Cockney flower lady Eliza Doolittle how to speak like a grand lady. He succeeded, but it was not an overnight process. Characters who decide to pass themselves off as aristocrats to sneak in somewhere, for instance, are very likely to give themselves away the first time one of them opens their mouths, or from something as simple as slouching or not walking in the gait recognized as "lordly" for the era.

Conversely, the noble who goes slumming with his roguish friends is likely to stick out like a sore thumb in those seedy environs, be he ever so dressed down. Table manners can be a dead giveaway, as can the simple act of ordering a beer: is it a friendly request to the bar-maid, or the demand of someone accustomed to be waited on from birth? Comportment says a great

deal about a character, and it is by such simple things that a PC's "class identity" can be known.

Once a character is "read" by onlookers, their reactions to the PC are likely to be significantly shaped by their understanding of his class. We find one ready example with the overused trope of the party meeting in a tavern to count their loot and look for someone who needs a job done. The instant that paladin walks in, the inn-keep and all the serving staff will be falling all over themselves. "We're honored to have your patronage, m'lord! Here, please take the best table, Sir Knight!" - and a whirl of people dancing attendance and attempting also to ingratiate themselves or earn a fat tip from the lordling who is, really, incredibly out of place in this ordinary tavern off the town square. There is no way the group will be able to conduct any private business here now that they've made themselves the center of attention, and anyway, Sir Paladin couldn't pass as a commoner if you paid him. He talks, walks, and dresses differently than common folk do.

In a world where the characters (and players) are aware of these nuances and actually deal with them in play, we have a world where class is starting to play a significant role.

Revisiting Characters: Three Aspects to Consider

Whether new or already established, it is useful for the GM to go over the roster of characters with his players and define them more closely in terms of class and class-related personal attributes. For groups where class has not played a prominent role in the past, I've found it useful to say in so many words, "I want to pay more attention to class in this world, and that might have some impact on your characters' experiences going forward," by way of introduction and expectation setting. Then I review these three things:

Class

If it hasn't evolved yet, I determine an appropriate background for each character: birth status, what class his or her parents fell into, how well regarded were they by their community, maybe get a feel for their level of wealth and resources. It's a good idea to do this in collaboration and cooperation with the players, so they can help develop meaningful "class roots", so to speak, and become invested in this aspect of their characters. Even if this background has evolved through gaming or character backstory, I review it with the player so we are crystal clear what niche in society has shaped his previous experiences. This gives me a baseline SEC niche to slot the character into, and this is something I record in my own notes about that character. I also say something about clothes, speech, likely social attitudes, that that character would have experienced growing up so they can get a feel for what is the norm for their class in society.

In some cases, where I am running a game with a particularly well-developed and/or unique culture, I may give the player a handout that describes his roots and his niche in society, at least the one he was born into, so I can go into some detail relevant to the individual about how he plus his background (class-wise) fits into the world and is perceived by others.

Peer Group

How old is the character now, and what kind of people has he spent most of his life around? People of one class typically associate only with others of that class, and this reinforces their class-slanted perspective on things. It is the unusual person (in historical settings, anyway) who has much to do with people outside their own class; the across-class-lines association so common to modern times is exactly that, a modern phenomenon. This has considerable implications, most of which you will have to work out based on the sociology of your world and culture. Here's an example of the impact this background can have.

The 19-year-old son of a village blacksmith on his first adventure as a low-level fighter has quite a different class experience than the grizzled mercenary veteran who has worked for several lords and traveled a lot of country with a wide variety of people. The blacksmith's son will sound like the low-born villager he is. His sense of fashion is limited to clean homespun on holidays, and he has a pretty simple black and white picture of what is expected and proper in the world. He's uncomfortable around well-born people; he found the squire of his village intimidating enough, and anyone with higher rank than that is better avoided. On the other hand, he's quite affable and is a regular good-natured hell-raiser among the rougher sort of people he is accustomed to socializing with. If he's adventuring with a group of people from mixed backgrounds, or dealing with other classes out in the world, this is going to push his comfort zone and present him with what we might kindly term "challenges" to his sense of self and how the world works.

The veteran, with his far-ranging life experiences, may have found it worthwhile to talk like his betters (he lands better mercenary contracts that way when bargaining with nobles), and because of his martial carriage can get away with dressing above his station when wearing finery for city leisure. As a result, he may often "pass" as higher born than he is, because of his convincing show. If he is ambitious he might take advantage of that illusion. Or, if he doesn't care, he might just as readily drop the facade to knock our young blacksmith on his butt when he gets out of hand, in a physical confrontation with the low-born that a truly high-born person would never get involved with.

Current Income



Socio***economic*** status relies in large part upon wealth to determine social standing. What, then, is the character's current and past level/s of income? If they get gobs of money from an adventure, spend it on a drunken sailor spree, and then head back out again with empty

pockets, they are not retaining enough wealth to effectively impact their relative SEC. However, if they are squirreling funds away, buying houses, spending money on better clothes and equipment, then over time they are setting themselves up to have an established and visible socioeconomic standing of the better sort.

Of course this standing is relative: their income might let them live on a par with an established small shopkeeper instead of like apprentices sleeping in a dormitory. Or, it might let them set up proper housekeeping in a town house in the rich merchant quarter, or live like lordlings in their own keep. Wherever and however characters establish an economic presence, they are carving out a distinctive niche for themselves, and – very importantly - the **people** around them will expect them to behave in keeping with the station they proclaim themselves to have.

In making economic progress and raising their station, some or all of the PCs are probably also separating themselves from their socioeconomic class of birth or association. This too can complicate things. How will Mother and the whole extended family react, they who live in cottages and now visit the prodigal son who lives like a rich man? The setting is marvelous, but it is quite above them all, and rather discomfoting to experience. Maybe the mother's son has turned into one of those rich bastards now, and thinks himself above the family's lowly problems (or so the family gossips assume...)

Or maybe drinking buddies from the throat-slitting dives the PCs once visited suddenly remember their old friends and show up on their doorstep expecting hospitality. Oh, now that you're so grand, you're not home to visitors like us? No worries. We can wait right here on your doorstep, or maybe go around back and case the joint while we're at it...

Because problems like this stem from class differences and SEC status (as well as personal relationships), they also root the characters more firmly in the world and create a sense of immersion about the culture itself. From our RPG perspective, these kinds of complications are pure gold, and can be turned into the stuff of new adventures by the clever GM. Analyzing class differences and thinking out the consequences in this manner give us a two-fer: more immersion in the culture, and great material for complicating the player characters' lives.

In the next post in this series, I'll talk about limitations, obligations and opportunities, and how they can define the dramatic interactions that emerge in game play.

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[How to Use Class in Historical Settings, Part 2 of 3](#)