Civilization
by Vylar Kaftan

Vylar Kaftan writes speculative fiction of all genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, and slipstream. Her work has appeared in Lightspeed Magazine, GigaNotoSaurus, Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, Cosmos, Escape Pod, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Sybil’s Garage, The Way of the Wizard, and in the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology Paper Cities. She lives with her husband Shannon in northern California.

If you were young in the 1980’s, you probably read at least one Choose Your Own Adventure Novel. Getting to pick your own way through the story always seemed so thrilling, until you came to the end and realized no matter what choices you made, it always turned out the same. Sometimes you even found yourself stuck in a loop, repeating the same stupid action over and over.

It was good training for real life, wasn’t it.

Our next story isn’t a cautionary tale of government gone bad or a social principle run amok. It’s quite simply an analysis of civilization, and the chilling recognition that good or bad, people in groups just can’t seem to get things right. Historians will agree: society after society keeps making the same ridiculous mistakes.

Just like your characters did when you steered them through those Choose Your Own Adventure books.

Civilization

1. Beginning

You have a civilization! It doesn’t matter which one—let’s say it’s modern Western civilization. It’s got fast food and sporting events, which is all you really need. Western technology gives you great military power—you have fantastic unstoppable tanks, and heat-seeking missiles to keep you safe. It’s a good place to start.

You could also have chosen a remote aboriginal tribe in the center of Australia—one with nuts and berries, and spears and ropes. Or you could have chosen Communist China, or that group of scientists living in Antarctica. But let’s stick to modern Western civilization. Let’s give you people, too. We’ll call them John and Jane. If you have a civilization, then you probably have at least two people in it.

Now, with your civilization comes a political system. Maybe your system is a democracy, and everyone gets a vote except the felons and child molesters. Maybe your system is a republic, and you market it as a democracy because it looks better on the brochures. Maybe your system is totalitarian, and you force everyone to enjoy the sound of that complicated word. Totalitarian!

But! A major choice awaits you. Are you traditional, bound by the past, certain that the old ways are the best because “we’ve always done it that way, so there”? Or are you radical, lured by the future, always hoping that the new ways will be better than the old because “we’ve never done it that way, so there”? Be warned, the future of your civilization depends on your choice. John and Jane’s lives are at stake.

If you choose tradition, go to section 2.
If you choose radicalism, go to section 5.

2. Tradition

You’re a traditionalist. Or a blind follower. Or just someone who reads everything in order, from start to finish. It doesn’t matter; you end up in the same place anyway.


So, you have a civilization. You have TV dinners and expensive cars. You hold elections. This is the way it’s always been done, and this is the way it must be. Never mind those fruitcakes in wigs who fought against the colonial powers. They were supporting Freedom and Liberty and other words that make great advertising. The corporations live off the people and the people trust the corporations. John and Jane relax, knowing that everything around them has worked for centuries.

Things stagnate. You hold more elections, or pretend to. The people in power have always been in power. The world is the way it’s always been. The police have always arrested people in the streets. The freedom to speak has always been restricted in the name of security. The corporations destroy the people and that’s the way it’s always been, and why would you question that, citizen?

Congratulations! You’ve got fascism!

Go to section 3.

3. Fascism

How nice for you, that you look so good in jackboots and a uniform! Your secret police are so dangerous that they’re sexy. They kick the enemies of the State in the street, like Rockettes in steel-toed boots. You sleep with national security books on your nightstand and a revolver under your pillow. Or maybe you just have secret meetings of secret societies in secret boardrooms, sealing fates with secret handshakes. The artists fill the gulags, and hey—cheap labor! So what if it’s not fair and equal? Equality is for hippies. John and Jane trust you to keep them safe at all times.

When you’re fascist, you’re always right, because God or Satan or your left boot told you what to do. Divine power is with you! That means that you’re right, and you’d better make sure everyone else knows it too. Let’s go to war!

Go to section 7.

4. Complacency

You’ve been in power an awfully long time now. Why pay attention any longer? There’s too many good shows on TV (or in the bullring, or in the arenas, or whatever you’ve got). You talk about the great sporting events on television and visit fast-food drivethroughs. You worry about whether your toothpaste is really doing all that a toothpaste should. After a while, you stop paying attention to anything at all. John and Jane are off doing something, but you’re not sure what. This is the way it’s always been, and this is the way it will always be. Is this progress? You aren’t sure.

Go to section 2.

5. Radicalism

You decide to experiment. Artists love your society. Painters color skyscrapers, and sculptors make art of garbage. Directors shoot movies in black light and show them in darkened theatres. Musicians shred the works of previous centuries. Corporations hold festivals to mock their own logos.

People are changing things from the way they’ve always been, just to make changes. Broken furniture becomes the new fashion. Everyone lives with six uncles and an aunt. John and Jane change their names to Isthmus and Quagmire. No matter what the new idea is, it must be
better than the old. You remember that you haven’t changed governments in a while. Throw out the old! Bring in the new! It’s time for a revolution!

Go to section 6.

6. Revolution

You hand out pamphlets in the street. Citizens march in protest of everything. The Hero of the People takes over in a bloodless coup. The former powers all commit a penitent suicide: on the same day, in the same prison, under your watchful eye. How convenient! You take note of all the former rules—because if that’s how they did it, now you must do it differently. You charter a new Constitution in a different font from the old one. Oh good, this regime is much better than the last one!

You suppress the counter-revolutionaries. They want to change everything. Any disagreement in society must be squelched. John and Jane must have their freedom. For the good of the new regime!

Go to section 4.

7. War

Oh boy, it’s war! Your regiments march like clockwork toys. Colonel Mustard is your general, with his dashing moustache and monocle. Your hats are quite classy, with a feather for each soldier (for officers, two!) On the streets, your noble supporters weep with pride as their loved ones march past. The people support the Cause (both sides, if it’s a civil war). Or if they don’t, you silence them, for national security. Jane blows John a kiss as he shoulders his weapon and heads away. He’ll come back a hero, and they will marry.

Your soldiers fight bravely. They pose for photos every time they save a small child from Tyranny. There’s no blood—at least, not in the photos. The enemy can’t oppose the side of Truth and Justice, which you’re quite certain is you.

Congratulations! You’ve won the war! Now for the next step: What kind of society do you want to build? Is your future an ideal Utopia, or a dark Dystopia?

If you build Utopia, go to section 8.
If you build Dystopia, go to section 9.

8. Utopia

Medicine: Disease has been eliminated, and people live to be 120 in perfect health. As a result, your people have more time to contribute to society and to enjoy their lives.

Agriculture: Food is mass-produced by advanced techniques so that there is plenty for everyone. Special additives in the food guarantee nutrition and health for every citizen.

Employment: Everyone is guaranteed a job that pays a living wage, so that all people have the means to support themselves.

Housing: No one is homeless. Citizens are guaranteed safe, affordable housing.

Education: Citizens may study any available information. The government provides the entirety of human history and current events, and encourages people to read.

Law: All issues are decided by fair courts. Mistakes are never made.

Government: The government wants to make sure the citizens are happy.

Wow! What a wonderful world you’ve built for yourself. Now, all that remains is to help everyone else enjoy Utopia!

Go to section 10.


9. **Dystopia**

   Medicine: Disease has been eliminated, and people live to be 120 in perfect health. As a result, your world is overpopulated and resources are scarce.

   Agriculture: Food is mass-produced by advanced techniques so that there is plenty for everyone. Special additives in the food guarantee obedience to the government.

   Employment: Everyone is guaranteed a job that pays a living wage, so that people are trapped in nightmarish jobs that they can’t leave.

   Housing: No one is homeless. People without homes live in institutions, where they are subjected to conditioning and experiments.

   Education: Citizens may study any available information. The government provides the information that citizens are authorized to see, and records who is reading it.

   Law: All issues are decided by fair courts. Mistakes, of course, are never made. How could they be?

   Government: The government wants to make sure the citizens are happy.

   Oh dear. What a horrible world you’ve made for yourself. Hey—those people next door, in that other place? They have Utopia, and you don’t. Misery loves company. It’s time to change some things.

   Go to section 10.

10. **Zeal**

   Rows of smiling identical people sing a patriotic anthem in perfect tune. In Utopia/Dystopia, you are never alone.

   Your society is happy, or it’s not. Someone else has it better, or they don’t. But you’re sure about one thing: other people are different from you. And that’s dangerous.

   Everyone else must share in your happiness or unhappiness. Everyone else must be just like you. Like Jane. Like John.

   Oh boy, it’s war again!

   Go to section 11.

11. **War, Again**

   I hope you’re not surprised. It always comes back to war. The details change, but the patterns remain the same.

   The last war was just for fun, but this one is serious. You’re blowing the left arms off babies and burning 10,000-year-old monasteries. You perfect the technique of keeping a soldier alive despite mortal injury; the technique is quite helpful for spies on suicide missions. Your soldiers pray to God in the field, but you don’t have time to answer. You’re busy making military decisions. This war is serious, and hard choices must be made. John marches off again, and someday will return to Jane. Or he won’t. That’s war.

   The question is, did you win? Will you dominate these not-like-you people and rule them with an iron hand? Or did you lose, and now face the destruction of your society?

   If you won, go to section 12.

   If you lost, go to section 14.

12. **Tyranny**
You’re mad at these people, these pathetic creatures you conquered. They started that horrible war! Now you must teach them a lesson. You make them build bigger stadiums and better fast food restaurants. Perhaps it’s tyranny, but it’s oppression with a smile—because you love them. That’s why you want them to be like you. Just like you. And once they learn your lesson, they will be like you. You want them to enjoy their world as much as you enjoy yours. Or hate it, the way you hate your own. It’s all for the good of John and Jane, who really should appreciate you more.

Unfortunately, your smiles aren’t enough to convince them of your love. There’s always room for assassination.

Go to section 13.

13. Assassination

Oops! Someone got crabby and killed your leader, in the shower. It’s terribly messy, with brains splattered on the bathroom wall.

Who do you blame? Why, it’s obvious. It’s the vice-president secret police Communists students Boy Scouts Mothers Against Drunk Driving anyone who isn’t you. People not you are responsible! People not you must pay!

Retaliation is swift and effective. You kill their leader. And the other leaders. And some people who aren’t leaders. And they kill more of your leaders. And non-leaders. The streets flow with blood.

Is this war again, again? No, it’s just collapse. Government structures tumble. Schools are boarded up. Garbage piles up because no one removes it. People burn textbooks for warmth. John and Jane live on scraps from their neighbors. Maybe someone finds an atomic weapon, and maybe they use it. Maybe they don’t need to.

Whichever way it happens, you’ve reached the apocalypse.

Go to section 14.

14. Apocalypse

Oh no! Your civilization is destroyed. No more fast food. No more sporting events. No more two-for-one buffalo wing specials.

It’s a mushroom cloud, billowing away in the breeze. Or a plague where everyone’s skin explodes with toxic pustules. Or intense radiation that boils the brains of 98% of the population.

All of the nice families with 2.5 children (maybe happy, maybe not) are vaporized like rain in a volcano. Or the corpses pile up like ants that ate poisoned bait. The survivors walk among the living dead—stealing granola bars from their purses but leaving the wallets, because who needs money anymore?

Nuclear winter sets in. Or a biological disaster. Or just sheer depression.

But there are a few survivors. There always are. And they can start over.

Go to section 15.

15. Survival

Groups of ragged survivors struggle across the wasteland, or rubble, or abandoned cities. John and Jane take things one day at a time. Their challenge is to live until the night—then to live through the night, and to live another day.

Food and shelter are scarce. Many people don’t make it. With time, the population balances so that it can support itself on the meager resources. This takes months, or it takes


years. But when enough time passes, a small tribe sits in a cave, or at an oasis, or by a river. John (or Jane) says, “Remember how much better things used to be?” The others throw rocks at him or her, and demand not to be reminded. They want to forget the dead times that can’t be revived. But Jane (or John) watches, and waits, and remembers.

Once the others have truly forgotten—and the past has become myth—s/he has an idea. S/he says to the others, “I will lead you to happiness and freedom! Everyone follow me!” John (or Jane) unifies the tribes. Jane (or John) thinks that s/he has a new idea, better than anyone’s ever had, something that will work. As always, certain choices must be made. But Jane and John are no different from you, in the end. They aren’t smarter or wiser. They’re just someone else.

Go to section 16.

16. Beginning, Again

Did you think the choices were terrible? They were. Are you disappointed in where your choices have led you? Don’t be. Other leaders have tried, and failed. The future is full of the same choices as the past. Nobody likes the choices, but civilization keeps moving.

Do you feel that you’re at the beginning, again? You are. It’s a circle. But there’s always hope for change—hope that the circle becomes a spiral staircase.

Look, here, see this. A room, with a table. It’s evening, or night. Look closely at the three people sitting around the table: John, Jane, their child. John smiles. He needs a shave, or perhaps he is bearded. Jane serves lasagna, or chicken casserole, as she tells her family about her day. The child is a girl, or a boy. The child sits in a highchair and gazes adoringly at John and Jane. After they eat, the parents take the child upstairs, singing a lullaby. It’s been a good day.

Their world is radical, or traditional. They vote like responsible citizens, but they’re more excited by the child learning to walk. The child grows up in revolution, or not, and marries a man, or a woman, or no one at all. S/he raises a family in Utopia/Dystopia or a world that is neither. When the apocalypse comes, s/he stays with the kids, who are grown up themselves and having a child. Despite the destruction, a baby is born.

You have a civilization.

Discussion:

As much as Kaftan's story might reflect parts of the endless cycle of civilizations, from the Byzantine Empire, Greece, Rome, Russia, Germany, Rwanda, Syria or the even the United States, I think her concepts could be modified to reflect bits of society closer to home.

Consider how this story would shift shape, but not concept it began:

You have a team! You have a job! You have a new school! You have a romance! You have a friendship! You have a youth group! You have a band! - any type of relationship structure where there are at least two people involved. You may use relational situations you have had personal experience with, combine real with fictional worse/best (but grounded in reality) case scenarios or choose to apply the ideas to a historical concept you know something about (Rwanda, Syria, The Beatles, Nirvana...)


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