

Part the First

Full Steam Ahead





Chapter 1

What Is Steampunk?

I see it as a reaction to the utter soullessness and disposability of modern tech. There are only so many garish space-eggs and tech bubbles you can look at before you just stop appreciating them. Steampunk harkens back to a time when technology was still novel and romantic, when the world was still marveling at its own cleverness with childlike pride and wonder, looking hopefully toward a strange and wonderful future.

—Richard Nagy, Datamancer.net

I've seen much debate online about what is and isn't *real Steampunk*. My least favorite is this one: "Steampunk is not real, so there are no rules and you can do anything you like and call it Steampunk." Sweeping definitions like this are not really helpful to the "goggle-curious." I personally have no fear of applying a bit of definition to help things along, so when asked in a recent interview to define Steampunk, I bravely said, "I'll write something up and have it to you next week."

So here's what I've come up with....

What Steampunk Is

According to subcultural folklore, the term "Steampunk" was first coined by author K. W. Jeter back in the early 1980s, during the heyday of cyberpunk. Instead of writing about cyberpunk's dystopian future, Steampunk authors such as Tim Powers, William Gibson, James Blaylock, and Bruce Sterling were looking back at a ruptured past, with technologies emerging out of sync with

our timeline and societies struggling to cope.

Although many people consider Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and George Chetwynd Griffith (by the way, these are some of my favorite authors in the entire universe) to be Steampunk authors, I believe they are better categorized as science fiction writers of their time. These authors wrote amazing things about their own time or about a speculative future.

I am going to push the boat out here and risk taking a shot across the bow from the S.P.P.D. (SteamPunk Police Department). The first piece of media to come about that I would classify as truly Steampunk is the '60s television show *The Wild Wild West* (pilot episode, 1965). There, I said it. I looked and nothing else really fit the bill. Yes, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* came out in 1954, but it was a movie based on a novel published in 1869. *The Wild Wild West* had all my prerequisites for good honest Steampunk, without any stretching of the definition whatsoever. It had the gadgets, the alternative history, the mad scientists, and dashing heroes. Others might wish to stretch the definition,

even if just to try and prove me wrong, but there is no question about whether *The Wild Wild West* was Steampunk or not—it just was.

According to that revered tome, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Steampunk is defined as “a genre of science fiction that typically features steam-powered machinery, rather than advanced technology.” And although the Oxford definition might be correct to a certain degree, I find it to be rather inadequate. Steampunk has graduated from a simple science fiction genre into a growing subculture. Its style is based on the clash of history and anachronism and infused with the demands and constraints of antiquated technology.

People are developing entire wardrobes and lifestyles based on where they park their airship. We used to joke that Steampunk is what happens when Goths discover the color brown, but that, too, would be an oversimplification. (Although I think the Steampunk world might owe some debt for its rapid growth and expansion to the fact that the success and popularity of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series vampire romance novels made vampires seem rather shiny and pathetic. This seems to have resulted in a mass migration of traditional Goths from the dark side to the sepia side—if one will permit the use of such a phrase.) And although Steampunk shares some elements with the gothic subculture at the fundamental level, such as their shared fascination with the strange and unusual, their foundation in literary works of the Victorian era, and their adoption of antiquated fashions of the late 19th century (though not exclusively, of course), Steampunk is still much more than that. Its literary roots make it a more character-driven world. One might dress Goth, but I seldom see people dressing generically Steampunk; instead, they put on their Lady Machinanna’s best hunting outfit, holster their Dr. Visbaun’s High Voltage Electro-Static Hand Cannon, and head off on a dinosaur hunt to deepest

far-flung Neptune. I hear it’s Victoriasaurus season on the Baron’s estate.

I discuss the two broad types of Steampunk worlds here: the alternative history, and retro-futurism/modernism.

Alternative History

It is the past but not quite the same as we remember it. Some shift has made science take an extra step, and society came along for the ride. Usually a few technologies or groups of technologies have made an advancement, while leaving other things behind. Maybe we can fly faster sooner, but Marconi’s radio is nowhere in sight. This brand tends to be more character-driven. People often create highly developed *dramatis personae* to fit into their “brave new world.”

Here’s an example: It’s 1879, and with the advent of Professor Grimmelore’s Patented Helium Expander, mankind has taken to the skies like never before. Expanded helium has six times the lift of standard hydrogen and is so much safer. The sky is buzzing with airships kept from colliding only by the constant vigilance of the tireless operators of Her Majesty’s Light Tower Semaphore Corps.

I can already hear moans from the crowd, but in all honesty, I believe the best example of this type of Steampunk, in the truest sense of the word, can be summed up in three words: *Wild Wild West*, the ’60s television series I mentioned earlier. The show had it all: dashing heroes, mad science, plots to take over the world, and Victorian flare. Of course, my favorite flavor alternative history is Victorian/Western, but it can be most any time up to now where things went a bit...different. Imagine if the internal combustion engine was never developed and we had steam cars in the ’40s and steam planes fighting WWII.

Retro-Futurism/Modernism

History, until the time of the story, tends to be the same as recorded. A group or culture has decided to pull its style from the past. Everything might have already changed, and now we are in the present day or the future, dealing with the consequences of what has already happened. Within the subculture this world is more of a “fashion/style statement” with not as much role-playing.

My favorite literary example of this is Neal Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age*. It’s the late 21st century and England has a new Queen Victoria. People are wearing full Victorian dress constructed of nearly indestructible and self-cleaning nanofabrics. This is one of the few books I’ve read more than once. Another good example of this is a 2006 movie *Perfect Creature*. It featured an alternative history but brought it up to a present or near-present place and time.

The Steampunk aesthetic is not only about books, movies, and television, however. Fashion,

Steampunk simply embodies a time and a place. The time...the late 19th century. The place...a steam-powered world, where air travel by fantastical dirigibles is as common as traveling by train or boat (or submarine). A place where national interests are vastly different than our own version of history. A place where the elegant and refined are as likely to get pulled into a grand adventure, as the workers, ruffians, and lower classes. A place where the idea of space travel is not so far-fetched. A place where lost civilizations are found and lost again. A place where anything is possible, and science can be twisted to meet one’s own ends. That to me is the essence of Steampunk. It can have political overtones and commentary, or it can be straight escapist fiction. Either way, if it meets these criteria, it is Steampunk.

—Joshua A. Pfeiffer, aka Vernian Process

music, and decor are all rapidly being integrated into this subculture. In mid-2006, with its album *Lost Horizons*, the band Abney Park became the first all-Steampunk band (as opposed to a band that occasionally plays goggle-friendly music). The band helped define the soundtrack of air piracy, and for a while, they were the only airship pirates. Other musicians soon followed—The Men That Will Not Be Blamed for Nothing, The Extraordinary Contraptions, Unextraordinary Gentlemen, Vernian Process, Dr. Steel, and Ghostfire, to name a few. A DJ could play all night at a party and not leave the Steampunk soundtrack.

What Steampunk Is Not (“Cog on a Stick”)

You know, just sticking a cog to your t-shirt does not make it a mechanical shirt.

—Professor M. P. Donnelly

No one likes to say, “these are the Steampunk rules that you must follow,” but there is a tendency within Steampunk art and fashion toward what I like to call “cog on a stick.” The best way to avoid the “cog on a stick” effect is for things to at least have the illusion of functionality. You are allowed to do anything you like, but the rest of us are also allowed to point and laugh at you.

All of this might have a deeper significance. Why now? Steampunk has been around for almost 30 years, and some would say even longer. Why are more and more people suddenly re-embracing the old aesthetics? I have a theory: Steampunk is a rebellion. The “Chap Manifesto” (www.thechap.net/content/section_manifesto/index.html) calls it a “charmed revolution.”

Look at our technology. Remember when radios and televisions were actually pieces of furniture encased in wooden cabinetry? They were pieces of art. Modern technology has none of that. The

The word Steampunk refers to a particular genre, aesthetic and even a reality that “might have been.” For some people, it’s an evolved fantasy/reality that might have been had internal combustion engines never taken hold or even been invented. Steampunk for me is a reality that “aims to be rather than to seem.” Indeed, it’s an aesthetic that is heavily versed in a climate of invention and innovation. The construction and methods of operation, the kinetics of the piece are exposed and on the surface, as opposed to boxed in and hidden behind a false casing. The wonderful thing about a steam engine is that you can follow the path of power generation and function beginning with the fire box and boiler, follow the plumbing, valves, gauges, gears, d-valves, pistons, eccentric shafts, and fly-wheels all the way from the source of power to the final outcome of kinetic potential.

Within this architectural aesthetic, there are no false walls, drop ceilings, prefab decorative elements or the mundane presence of modern conveniences. Theatre is wonderful, but theatre is false in its constructions. There is nothing false or “out of the box” when talking about the Steampunk aesthetic. You’ll find that there is an incredible complement between a variety of disparate materials that can usually be found in any Steampunk conceived of device... wood, brass, rivets, gears, lenses, cast iron, etc. . . . Steampunk is an honour to an era when people thought big, and worked hard to make things that last. It is not like the disposable culture of commodity that we have today. Care, artisanship, and craftsmanship were put into everything that was created.

—Sean Orlando, Kineticsteamworks.org

industrial revolution made more things available for the common person, which is great, but all of them were made the same, which is boring. Everything became so much about making money, and bland is now the common denominator. The first commercially available computers, for example, came in one color: putty. Attempts to change this on the corporate level have been limp, at best (“Now, in black!”). We have the technology, but where’s the grace? Why aren’t wood-grain outer casings available for our laptops? People would buy that. People on the street who have never even heard of Steampunk see my laptop bag

and desperately ask me where they can buy one. When I tell them I made it, they offer to buy it right there. I would love to sell it to them, but then what would I use to hold my laptop?

The popularity of retro-styled cars is one indicator that people are hungry for more accessible beauty in their everyday lives. Steampunk looks to the past, where ornamentation was relished and encouraged, and it applies that desire for beauty *and* functionality to our modern lives. The Steampunk ethos and aesthetic makes it possible to apply modern technology with these old designs, while still being cost-effective.



Photo by Scott Church