

Steampunk

■ Melinda Rackhan

gunpowder and cups of tea

In the early 1990s I spent endless hours exploring winding and forking tunnels, hunting for clues in ornate abandoned follies and moving the gears and levers of rusting machinery on the electronic island of *Myst*. This seminal media artwork changed digital culture in many ways – from driving the uptake of CD-ROMs to shifting the perception of videogames into the realms of a serious artform. The enticing and solitary island of *Myst*, based on Jules Verne's 1874 novel *L'Île Mystérieuse*, also provided a visual genealogy for the fledgling Steampunk movement. Let's investigate the backstory:

Influenced by the Gothic Romantic science fiction of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Verne's *L'Île Mystérieuse* and other magnificent tales were played out amongst space, air, and underwater travel technologies before they were invented. Both Verne and H. G. Wells were exponents of Victorian ideas of socialism, and pioneered the science-fiction genre in the post industrial revolution years. Wells, particularly, had his perspectives of economic and social reform honed at Fabian Society lectures delivered in the home of William Morris, the instigator of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

This intertwining network of artistic, creative, intellectual, political and literary influences spawned – a century later – a rather obscure and ill-defined subculture. This movement, now known as Steampunk, is intent on creating a richly textured and hand-crafted alternative to the vulgar plasticity and minimalism of mass-production. Characterised by romance and adventure, the soft glow of gaslight and the opulence of silk, leather, brass and polished wood – Steampunk's aesthetics are drawn from the art, design and science of the period 1830 to 1930.

Steampunk was formalised in the mid-1980s when science fiction writer K.W. Jeter coined the term as a tongue-in-cheek response to 'cyberpunk' literature. With the predictability of whirring pocket clockwork, Steampunk has evolved into a substantial movement over the past 30 years, with chapters around the globe meeting regularly for social events organised via the internet. Steampunk communities also congregate in Second Life colonies such as New Babbage, a space of highly crafted gritty industrial laneways, nestled between proud 21st century Victorian architecture – zeppelins humming overhead in the smog-filled skies.

Commonly, Steampunks invent unique neo-Victorian alter-egos, and adopt flourishing elaborate pseudonyms. With its nostalgia for predictability and a proclivity for fantasy, Steampunk culture is rather anachronistic, attracting a diverse demographic, including a large percentage of women. In this neo-Victorian culture feminism reigns and women

are assuming the roles of inventors, scientists, self-possessed courtesans and adventurers in what appears to be a very well-mannered society of ladies and gentlemen.

Steampunk gatherings engage in something that lies between Live Action Role Playing ('Larping'), and 'Cosplay'. While the distinction is blurry, Larping is a more directed game environment (where there is a plot and players pursue goals), whereas Cosplayers assume costumes and accessories to represent a pre-existing real or fictional identity (which could range from Japanese anime, video games, *Star Trek* or *Harry Potter* characters, to Renaissance fairs or armed conflict re-enactments). Both forms involve remediation, the re-fashioning of events, and crafting clothes and objects to populate a serious playworld.

Prolific costuming – contemporary variations on Victorian and Gothic fashion, sets Steampunk apart as a seductive sub-culture emerging from the underground. Women rustle in fabulous gowns, augmented by petticoats and bustles, corsages and parasols – and rather more daring undergarments than Victoriana would have allowed. Louise Black's frisky corsets will whittle 12cms off the waist, while still allowing one to breathe. Crafting superb Victorian Steampunk Cameo Corsets in a range of exotic and quirky designs, Black is renowned for her hybrid *Anatomical Medical Skeleton Cameo* (2008).

Gentlemen (and also some lady adventurers) tend to prefer well-tailored suits, vests, coats, top hats and spats. There is a large following for faux-military gear with goggles, pocket watches and weaponry – *Dr. Grordbort's Infallible Aether Oscillator* being the ray-gun de rigueur. Modded accessories mimic Victorian-era objects, with DIY instructions posted on web sites such as the Steampunk Workshop, by master-craftsman Hieronymus Isambard 'Jake' von Slatt. Jake's blog generously annotates every stage of a range of modifications, from acid-etching your iPod to sensitively converting a school bus, Steampunk-style.

Of course Steampunk extends into the moving image – from the 1965 clockwork-gadged *Wild, Wild West* TV series and Hayao Miyazaki's 1986 anime film *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, to the current blockbuster Hollywood period adventure *Sherlock Holmes*. Literature, too, has embraced the genre. Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995) conjures a futuristic Pygmalion scenario, where a girl from the Cyberpunk slums is raised to be a neo-Victorian lady by an interactive book; while William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990) returns to a fanciful Victorian England running on Charles Babbage's hardware and ruled by Lord Byron.



Richard Nagy *The Datamancer Ergo Keyboard*, 2008

Paul St George *Telectroscope*, installation view, London, 2008. Photo: Matthew Andrews. Project Producer: Artichoke.





Katri Kaligawa *Winter Skating* screen capture from *Second Life*, 2009.

Artisans play a pivotal role in maintaining and attracting newcomers to the Steampunk community, with their labour intensive one-off creations available for purchase on Ebay and Etsy. For many it is a mission to redress the sins of modern manufacturing. Richard Nagy (aka Datamancer) laments that the defining invention of our age – the personal computer – has for so long been encased in beige plastic. His goal is to ‘retrocentrically create a false historical heritage for the modern computer’. The resultant *Nagy Magical-Movable-Type Pixello-Dynamotronic Computational Engine™* is lovingly crafted with gleaming brass, hand-stitched leather, rich textiles and the unofficial emblem of Steampunk – a plethora of cogs.

Veteran crafters Brute Force Studios have adorned Steampunk men and women with robust corsets, arm-guards, monocles, spiked gas masks, leather bras and a range of more genteel wearable art for over two decades. Professor Isadora Maelstromme (alter ego of Amanda Scrivener of Professor Maelstromme’s Steam Laboratory) and her partner Lord Archibald Featherstone (aka Thomas Willeford) offer serious mechanical augmentation devices. Rivalling Stelarc’s *Third Hand* (1976-94), their *Clockwork Maelstromme Replacement Arm Mark II* (2009) is a bespoke artwork, taking four months to build (and, I imagine, a rather sturdy constitution to wear).

Steampunk art can also play out on a massive scale. In 2008, Paul St George installed two enormous telescope-like devices – *A Telectroscope* – linking the Brooklyn Bridge in New York to the Tower Bridge in London. The *Telectroscope* supposedly utilised a secret Victorian trans-Atlantic tunnel (started by the artist’s fictional great-grandfather) and contained a prototype television system which allowed people to see and hear over immense distances.

The success of this spectacle of the antiquated mechanical linking of public space, in these days of instant connection and cloud computing, is testament to Steampunk’s power to suspend disbelief and revel in the fantastic. Even though this real-time linking has been the subject of earlier interactive installation works,¹ the *Telectroscope* allowed audiences to imaginatively retreat to a more gentle time, when fanciful and delicious technological fabrications materialised in the realms of everyday life.

Steampunk guilds also thrive in Australia – congregating under parasols on Sydney Harbour ferries, strolling around Melbourne’s Fitzroy Gardens at the *Time Travellers Picnic*, catching steam trains to Mildura, Steampunk clubbing in Brisbane, or Larping at the *Maiden Flight of the Olympia Ball* in Adelaide. Antipodean Steampunk Adventurer ‘Mad Uncle Cliff’ has been spotted stalking the corridors of the Powerhouse Museum in search of inspiration for his next creation. A Steampunk may even be sitting next to you on the tram with their modded iPod, shuffling genre bands Abney Park and Vernian Process.

Across its many manifestations, what binds the creative Steampunk community is a philosophy that embraces the novel and romantic. Steampunk opens up a space where playing is person-to-person as well as peer-to-peer: at once practical and fanciful, elegant and grimy, Gothic revival, horror, science fiction, crafting, burlesque, tinkering, punk, DIY, satire, sublime. With its gritty smog-filled fantasies, wild mechanical manifestations and feminist femme-fatales, Steampunk has (like *Myst* before it) enchanted me. ■

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Melinda Rackham curates and writes on emerging art practices and networked and distributed cultures. She is currently Adjunct Professor of Media and Communications at RMIT University.

1. Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinovitz, *Hole in Space* (1980), and Maurice Benayoun, *The Tunnel under the Atlantic* (1995).

Brute Force Studios & Professor Maelstromme *Steam Laboratory Steampunk Clockwork Arm*, 2009. Photo: Nuby Deleon. Model: Pete Carter. Vest: Berit New York. Make Up artist: Zarah Arlene.

