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Abstract

Steampunk can be defined as a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy featuring fictional technology based on the steam power of the 19th century. Characterized by gears, goggles, and fantastical inventions like airships and automatons, this uniquely bizarre offshoot of SF has recently evolved into a cultural phenomenon. This research paper explores the origins, progression, and modern manifestations of steampunk science fiction in order to discover the reasons for its recent popularity. In this paper, I will argue that steampunk has gained increased popularity because it invokes feelings and reactions to the first technological revolution that have become lost in our apathetic modern society. The Victorian sense of wonder and potential mixed with fear of what this new age could mean was what inspired writers such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, whose works are cited as some of the main inspirations of steampunk. Modern society stands on a similar threshold, but unlike the Victorians we lack this sense of mystified fascination; instead, technology has become commonplace and dull. Steampunk is a reflection on the relationship between man and machine that emphasizes the weird and whimsical elements of romanticized Victorian technology to usher in a new era of wonder and progress.

Man and Machine in the World of Steam: The Emergence of Steampunk as a Cultural Phenomeon

By Solange Kiehlbauch

The term "steampunk" was coined by science fiction author K.W. Jeter in 1987. In a letter to *Locus* magazine, Jeter jokingly threw out a term for a budding theme in his own works, as well as novels by Tim Powers and James Blaylock, that blended neo-Victorian elements with futuristic technology. "I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing," he wrote, "as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term for Powers, Blaylock and myself. Something based on the appropriate technology of the era; like 'steam-punks', perhaps."[1] This term was a play on the SF genre cyberpunk, which explores "(often dark) ideas about human nature, technology and their respective combination in the near future."[2] Cyberpunk emerged in the 1980s as a tool to consider the possible implications of new technology such

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1   Jeff VanderMeer with S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible* (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), 48.
2   SFAM, "What is Cyberpunk?," *The Cyberpunk Review,* accessed May 9, 2014, http://www.cyberpunk-review.com/what-is-cyberpunk/.

as the Internet. Instead of looking to the future, steampunk looks to the past, using alternate history to explore these same ideas.[3] An official definition of the genre is a topic of much debate, but steampunk is generally described as "a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy featuring advanced machines and other forms of fictional technology based on the steam power of the 19th century."[4]
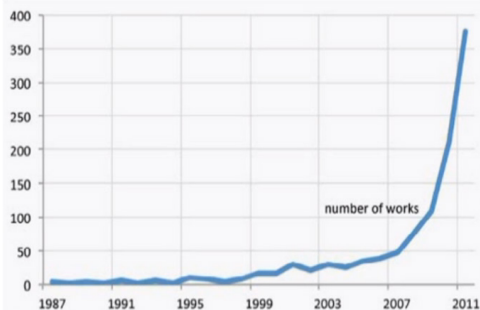

Figure 1: The rise of steampunk culture

In recent years, steampunk has not only evolved into its own distinct literary genre — it has become a cultural phenomenon. In their book *Vintage Tomorrows*, which explores the rise of steampunk culture, historian James H. Carrott and futurist Brian David Johnson included a graph depicting the growth of steampunk cultural activity from 1987 to 2011 (Figure 1).[5] Their data shows that this cultural activity (which includes published works such as fiction, non-fiction, comics, graphic novels, TV, film, games and music) remained at a steady low until 2007, when it experienced a sharp increase that has continued to the present day. This change occurred around the time the iPhone, Kindle, and Android came out — inventions that dramatically altered our way of life and perception of technology. Carrott and Johnson concluded that steampunk's popularity has skyrocketed because people want their technology — which has become commonplace to the point of dullness — to have what they call the big three: humor, history, and humanity.[6] In

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3   Cherry, Brigid, and Maria Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk: Subculture, Fashion, and Performative Identity," *Punk & Post-Punk* 1, no. 1 (2012): 6, accessed May 9, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/84732838.html.

4   Sara Jackson, "Taking the Steampunk Train: Author Mark Hodder Explains the Genre of History and Fantasy." *Writer* 125 no. 11/12 (2012): 45, accessed May 9, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/89372078.html.

5   Carrott, James H. and Brian David Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows* (Sebastopol, CA: Maker Media, 2013), 9.

6   Ibid., 13.

her influential article examining steampunk in everyday practice, historian Rebecca Onion also argues that steampunk's rise in popularity is a reaction to contemporary technology. She believes steampunk practitioners "desire to regain a human connection with the machine world," and that "steampunk seeks to restore coherence to a perceived 'lost' mechanical world."[7]

In the past decade, steampunk has leapt from the pages of books to the real world, where it developed into a fandom that is steadily gaining steam (no pun intended). Steampunk has become its own unique culture whose adherents bring imagined worlds of airships, automatons, and raygun-wielding gentlemen to life through art, fashion, music, conventions, and other forms of expression. By grafting futuristic technology onto neo-Victorian worlds, steampunks seek to recapture the sense of awe that the Victorians felt during the Industrial Revolution, which they see as comparatively absent in our own "Third Industrial Revolution." Steampunks embrace and fetishize elements of a romanticized Victorian past to add life and character to not only their technology but also to their lifestyle. By modifying their gadgets, adopting techno-Victorian décor and fashion, and embracing the DIY ethos that the genre promotes, steampunk adherents have allowed this SF genre to evolve into a cultural movement. In a world that has become desensitized and apathetic to progress, steampunk's quirky charm captures the imagination and humanizes the ever-advancing technology that threatens to alienate its users. In this sense, steampunk represents a rebellion not only against contemporary technology, but also against a society that is becoming just as dull and disconnected as the devices it produces. This philosophy has allowed steampunk to evolve from a literary genre to a cultural phenomenon that has begun to infiltrate the mainstream consciousness.

The recent emergence of steampunk culture has been examined by a number of historical and literary scholars. The general consensus among these scholars is that steampunk is a reaction to the technology that has developed in the last decade. In 2010, *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* released a special issue titled "Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies." In the issue's introduction, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall state "the nature of modern technology – sleek, standardized, small, inaccessible – makes Victorian technology (large, quirky, accessible) appealing." Furthermore,

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7   Rebecca Onion, "Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 138, accessed May 9, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/2011140637.html.

they say, "steampunk protagonists are tinkerers, which is appealing because our technology is not able to be tinkered with in the same way."[8] Rebecca Onion's article "Reclaiming the Machine" further explores this notion of the accessible machine. Onion argues that "steampunks see modern technology as offensively impermeable to the everyday person, and desire to return to an age when, they believe, machines were visible, human, fallible, and above all, accessible."[9] In their book *Vintage Tomorrows*, James Carrott and Brian Johnson interviewed a number of steampunk authors, artists, pioneers, and enthusiasts in order to understand the genre's increasing appeal. They concluded that people "want their technology to have a sense of humor, a sense of history, and most importantly a sense of humanity."[10]

Steampunk glorifies all of these qualities, and its adherents long for, manipulate, and even build their own devices to combine futuristic technology with a romanticized old world aesthetic. Unlike our iPhones, MacBooks, and iPods, these devices have their own unique sense of character. One can plainly see the sense of quirkiness and whimsy in their design (humor), clear allusions to or use of Victorian mechanics or motifs (history), and the creative force behind them (the human element). Contemporary technology is mass-produced, easily manufactured and replaced, and lacks any real sense of character. Victorian machines, on the other hand, were unique, handcrafted, and often charmingly bizarre. Some examples include intricate mechanical looms, automated machines for folding envelopes and making cigarettes, and larger, more awe-inspiring devices such as steam locomotives. Unlike contemporary machines, which are designed above all to be efficient and cost-effective, these inventions incorporated elements of artistry and creativity, as their inventors designed them to attract attention and appeal to the public's sense of wonder.[11] Furthermore, the average person cannot easily fix, modify, or manipulate their devices — a consequence of our technology's ever-increasing complexity. As Bowser and Croxall point out, even a task as simple as changing an iPhone battery requires a trip the Apple store. This inaccessibility has led people to become alienated from their technology and nostalgic for the simpler devices of the past. In steampunk, they say, individuals are masters of their tools rather than the other way around — a refresh-

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8   Bowser and Croxall, "Introduction: Industrial Revolution," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1, accessed May 19, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/2011140631.html.

9   Rebecca Onion, "Reclaiming the Machine," 139.

10   Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows,* 13.

11   Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 63.

ing and appealing notion to those who fall into the latter category. [12]

The desire for accessible, unique technology is just one important factor in steampunk's recent rise in popularity. In order to understand another piece of the puzzle, we must examine why steampunks chose to embrace nineteenth-century technology. The steampunk aesthetic revolves around the technology of England's first Industrial Revolution. This movement, which was one of the most pivotal events in the history of mankind, marked the first widespread development and use of mechanization. By the 1840s, steam had replaced human and animal power, people migrated to cities to work in the newly constructed factories, and locomotives rumbled through the countryside.[13] The birth of these innovations led Victorian social critic Thomas Carlyle to dub this period "the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word." English citizens of all classes celebrated these incredible new inventions and marveled at the "god-like inventors and makers of machinery."[14] These machines, especially the ones that moved automatically by steam and later electrical power, were particularly enthralling because they seemed to be alive.[15] This sense of wonder surrounding man's technological accomplishments was best embodied in the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, a grand exhibit showcasing new machines and machine-made commodities. [16]

There was, however, a dark side to this feverish quest for progress. The Industrial Revolution spawned a host of horrors such as crowded, dirty cities, rampant disease, inhumane working conditions, and low wages. In addition, a growing sense of anxiety hovered over the Victorian conscience.[17] The blend of wonder and terror surrounding this new technology can be seen in "The Steam Arm," a popular Victorian song about a veteran who receives a steam-powered prosthetic. At first, the invention seems miraculously marvelous, but it proves to be too powerful for the man to control, ultimately leading to disaster. In the end, he is forced to leave his home and wander the streets while "his arm keeps moving with two-horse might" — a fate that represents the Victorian fear of technology's potentially uncontrollable

12   Bowser and Croxall, "Introduction," 20.
13   Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Technology: Invention, Innovation, and the Rise of the Machine* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009), 3.
14   Ibid., 7.
15   Ibid., 49.
16   Ibid., 54.
17   Ibid., 4.

power.[18] Steampunk, however, focuses on the positive aspects associated with the Industrial Revolution. Michaela Sakamoto reflects on this focus in her examination of steampunk culture. "In steampunk," she says, "We have the Industrial Revolution sans pollution, poverty, and disease. Indeed, it is truly the dawn of hope for the future. In these worlds that advent of new discovery holds the promise of Utopia, a perfected world."[19]

Steampunks hope to recapture the Victorian sense of wonder surrounding new technology in the hopes of applying it to our own "Third Industrial Revolution." Like the Victorians, we are currently producing and planning a myriad of technological advances with incredible potential, but because these advances are so commonplace, we do not share the same sense of excitement. As Lily Camption, a character from Paul Guinan and Anina Bebbett's novel *Boilerplate* remarks, "We have discovered a new irony of the modern age: In a place where everything is a wonderment, nothing is a wonderment."[20] Advancements that the Victorians could only dream of — space travel, genetic engineering, computers that fit in the palm of our hand — are now just accepted facts of life. We are in a state of information overload; there are so many new innovations that we simply cannot keep up with them all. These advancements, therefore, have largely lost their novelty. Steampunks seek to challenge this view and recapture our sense of wonder.

Steampunk began as a literary movement that sought to explore man's relationship to technology in a more optimistic fashion than hard SF authors. The first true steampunk works were published in the 1980s. Although the term itself was not invented until 1987, novels and stories such as Tim Powers' *The Anubis Gates* (1983), James Blaylock's "Lord Kelvin's Machine" (1985), and K.W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979) are now considered steampunk. These works were "excellent adventure and mystery narratives, often with a social emphasis, a focus on clockwork/steam technologies, and a definite awareness of Verne and Wells."[21] The Victorian SF authors Jules Verne and H.G. Wells provided major inspiration for early steampunk writers. Verne

18   Kirstie Blair, "'The Steam Arm': Proto-Steampunk Themes in a Victorian Popular Song," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 206-207, accessed May 19, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/ 2011140629. html.

19   Michaela Sakamoto, "The Transcendent Steam Engine: Industry, Nostalgia, and the Romance of Steampunk," *The Image of Technology* (2009): 129, Colorado State University-Pueblo, accessed May 19, 2014, http://ebscohost.com/stable/2009297293.html.

20   Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 160.

21   Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible* (New York: Abrams Image, 2001), 49.

wrote travel/adventure stories that featured meticulously detailed, plausible technologies, such as the famous submarine in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.[22] Wells, on the other hand, was more focused on using SF as a vehicle for social commentary, such as his examination of class warfare in *The Time Machine*.[23] Steampunk novels take "Verne's fantastical and playful imagination" and combine it with "Well's sociological approach to facilitate changing the future."[24] The number of steampunk literary works increased in the 1990s after the genre was given its own name. These later works focused more on technology than their predecessors — a change that reflected the steady advancement and expansion of technology during this time.[25] One of the most famous steampunk novels produced during this period was William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's The Difference Engine, a "dystopian alternate reality [set in 1855] in which Charles Babbage successfully built a mechanical computer, thus ushering in the Information Age at the same time as the Industrial Revolution."[26]

The time frame surrounding the production of the first true steampunk novels gives important insight into their authors' inspiration and recently expanded following. Steampunk literature emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the cyberpunk genre and pessimistic attitudes surrounding the emergence of new technologies.[27] Cyberpunk SF explores the potential, often dire consequences of recent, life-changing inventions such as the personal computer and the Internet in future societies.[28] These stories are far from the escapist adventures of earlier SF — they are dystopian, pessimistic, and cautionary. Some steampunk works are also dystopian, such as The Difference Engine, but they are usually far more optimistic than cyberpunk. It is this optimism that contributes to steampunk's contemporary appeal. Author Paul Di Filippo commented on this phenomenon, saying, "Steampunk takes a more optimistic view of technology. It's more concerned with things that people can imagine as opposed to why we can't do something."[29] Steampunk's positive view of technology represents a refreshing change from the discouraging, often frightening pessimism that often characterizes contemporary SF.

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22   Jeff VanderMeer and SJ Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, 33.
23   Ibid., 38.
24   Ibid., 44.
25   Bowser and Croxall, "Introduction," 13.
26   VanderMeer and Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, 57.
27   Bowser and Croxall, "Introduction," 13.
28   "What is Cyberpunk?"
29   Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 96.

The allure of steampunk literature lies in futuristic worlds, where technology is neither cold and dull nor overwhelming and threatening. Steampunk technology is quite different from the usual SF projections of ultra-modern robots, spaceships, and laboratories; its quirky Victorian charm makes it seem artistic and alive. Steampunk worlds are warm and whimsical, and the technology in them has a sense of soul. More importantly, these stories project a future that captures readers' imaginations rather than predictions that fill them with dread.

The next stage in steampunk's transition from a literary genre to a culture of its own was through visual media such as comics and film. Brigid Cherry and Maria Mellins' article "Examining the Punk in Steampunk" includes a graph that traces the history of steampunk through different mediums.[30] This graph depicts a significant increase in the production of steampunk visual media (film and television, comics, computer games) in the early 2000s. These forms of visual media are an important addition to the genre because they serve to capture the beauty of steampunk worlds and devices in a way that text simply cannot do justice. As Cory Doctorow, a steampunk author and enthusiast, says, "Steampunk is best as a visual style. It shines when it's visual."[31] Bryan Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* comic series, which was published in the late 1970s, is perhaps the first example of a steampunk literary work that incorporates these visual images.[32] The series details the adventures of an albino secret agent who travels to parallel worlds such as a "puritanical alternative Britain where Cromwell won the Civil War - a land of Armstrong-Siddley Vibro Beamer weapons, Rolls Royce motor carriages and a populous living in squalor and wearing fashions that haven't moved forwards in centuries."[33] One example of a more recent comic that particularly captures the steampunk spirit is Warren Ellis's *Captain Swing and the Electrical Pirates of Cindery Island*. This comic, which is beautifully illustrated in a traditional woodcut style, features such wonders as electrical bullets, flying ships, and mechanical villains set against the noir back alleys of Victorian London.[34] Steampunk comics have also expanded to the Internet. One of the most notable webcomics is Phil and Kaja Foglio's *Girl Genius*, which revolves

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30 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 10.

31 Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 55.

32 VanderMeer and Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, 69.

33 Richard Bruton, "Graphic Novel Classic Library: Luther Arkwright," *Forbidden Planet*, accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.forbiddenplanet.co.uk/blog/2010/graphic-novel-classic-library-luther-arkwright/.

34 Ellis Warren and Raulo Caceres, *Captain Swing and the Electrical Pirates of Cindery Island,* (Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press, 2011).

around a war between rival scientists during the Industrial Revolution. [35]

Although there have not been any Hollywood films explicitly labeled as steampunk, there are a number of recent films that contain steampunk themes and imagery. Hayao Miyazaki's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, for example, takes place on an "alternate Earth in which obsession with flying machines has led to its ultimate manifestation in the form of hundreds of floating cities and fortresses." Miyazaki remarked that the machines in this world "are not the products of mass production, rather they still possess the inherent warmth of handcrafted things"[36] — a truly steampunk idea. Other recent steampunk-esque films include *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (an adventure story based on a comic by Alan Moore that features figures like Wells, Verne, and Arthur Conan Doyle)[37] and Guy Richie's *Sherlock Holmes* (which portrays Holmes as a Verne-inspired mad inventor).[38] Steampunk visual media serves to breathe new life into the genre and emphasize the sense of awe that steampunk technology is supposed to produce. As Cherry and Mellins point out, steampunk lifestyle communities began to emerge just before this surge in visual media.[39] The correlation is no coincidence. First of all, visual media allowed more people to become exposed to steampunk, as these forms of media appeal to a wider audience than literature. This is because, as Adam Roberts states in his examination of the rising popularity of SF films, "the inherent populism of [visual media] has meant that such works achieve a much deeper cultural penetration than was the case with novels or poems."[40] In addition, comic books, films, and other visual media captured audiences' attention more than steampunk literature could because it allowed people to see the antiqued beauty of these worlds and devices. Visual media was one of the major stepping-stones in the evolution of steampunk culture, serving to widen its fan base and provide inspiration for the various cultural manifestations that would soon emerge.

In the last five to ten years, steampunk has expanded from the literary genre where it began to become its own distinct subculture. Interestingly, the mechanism that was largely responsible for this change was technology itself; it was the Internet that allowed steampunk to flourish. As James Carrott

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35   Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, 78.
36   Ibid., 182.
37   Ibid., 188.
38   Ibid., 193.
39   Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 10.
40   Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 264.

remarks in *Vintage Tomorrows*, "if you want to be a steampunk, all you have to do is go online."[41] It may appear somewhat ironic that the Internet, which seems to represent the type of technology that steampunk rebels against, was so instrumental to its evolution. This correlation is not quite as ironic as it seems at first glance, however, as steampunks rebel more against the physical nature of contemporary devices than the advancements that they produce. The Victorians they emulate, after all, were far from opposed to technological innovation; they embraced its potential for positive societal change. The Internet is simply a platform that fosters connection — it's the impersonal devices and their mass-produced, inaccessible nature that steampunks are dissatisfied with.

A steampunk lifestyle community began to emerge online in the mid-2000s. Its genesis occurred "around the same time or shortly after members of the SF fan community began receiving significant online recognition of their art and model making with steampunk mods of popular SF texts" — such as a modified steampunk lightsaber.[42] Steampunk blogger Kim Ryser provides a compelling description of the steampunk lifestyle:

> I think steampunk is an attitude, a philosophy, and a way of approaching things. Steampunk celebrates DIY, remixing, reusing, and repurposing. Steampunk includes an appreciation for beautiful things, decoration for decoration's sake, and quality craftsmanship. Steampunk doesn't follow the rules and defies expectations. [43]

The most important part of Ryser's statement is the inclusion of the phrase DIY. Steampunk is a particularly "producerly" fan culture — that is, its adherents have a particular penchant for producing physical works that represent their fandom.[44] One of the main characteristics that sets steampunk apart from other fandoms and supports its participants' identity as a lifestyle is their love of making things. The Internet has allowed steampunks to exhibit their creations, exchange ideas with other enthusiasts, keep blogs recording their latest adventures, and buy and sell both supplies and finished items. Websites developed in recent years to propagate the steampunk life-

41 Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 10.
42 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 10.
43 Kim Ryser, "Living a Steampunk Lifestyle," Steam Ingenious, accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.steamingenious.com/2013/12/living-steampunk-lifestyle.html.
44 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 11.

style range from forums such as BrassGoggles[45] to blogs discussing steampunk décor, fashion, music, and news.[46] Steampunks are an extremely unique fandom because they are so focused on adopting a specific lifestyle. This includes endeavors such as adding neo-Victorian elements to their fashion to redecorating their homes with a whimsical Victorian theme.

The next stage in the evolution of steampunk culture was the development of steampunk art, which serves to bring imagined worlds and inventions vividly to life. Steampunk art began to emerge around the mid-2000s influx of steampunk novels and visual media. The steampunk aesthetic incorporates elements of an imagined Victorian past such as distressed theater posters and faded maps; cogs, clockwork mechanisms, and watch parts; steam engines, airships, and hot air balloons; color palettes of golds, browns, and sepias; patina and rusted metal (signifying age); and materials like wood and brass. Steampunk art includes everything from traditional illustrations and paintings to sculptures and Victorian-inspired machines.[47] Some of them are awe-inspiringly grand, like the Neverwas Haul, a three-story travelling neo-Victorian house,[48] and "The Sultan's Elephant," a life-size model of the mechanical pachyderm in Jules Verne's *The Steam House.*[49] Others are smaller but no less intriguing, such as Mike Libby's robotic insects[50] and Doctor Grordbort's techno-Victorian guns.[51] Steampunk art has also developed a specific subgenre known as modding: "the act of modifying contemporary technology with the addition of an ornate steampunk exterior." This practice began primarily with "case modding," where people modified their laptops, computers, and iPods with various steampunk-influenced designs using cogs, wheels, steam pipes, radio valves and typewriter keys. Modding has taken the steampunk world by storm, and it's enthusiasts have customized everything from computers and telephones to musical instruments.[52]

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45 "The Steampunk Forum at BrassGoggles," *BrassGoggles,* accessed May 20, 2014, http://brassgoggles. co.uk/forum/.

46 See, for example, "The Steampunk Home," accessed May 20, 2014, http://thesteampunkhome. blogspot.com/; "Steampunk Fashion," accessed May 20, 2014, http://steamfashion.livejournal.com/; "Steampunk Music: The Sound of a World That Might Have Been," accessed May 20, 2014, http://steampunk-music.com/; "Steampunk News," accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.steampunknews.co.uk/.

47 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 7.

48 "Neverwas Haul – Obtainium Works," *Obtainium Works*, accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.obtainiumworks.net/neverwas-haul/.

49 Jeff VanderMeer with S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible,* 116.

50 Jay Strongman, *Steampunk: The Art of Victorian Futurism* (London: Korero Books, 2011), 124.

51 Jay Strongman, *Steampunk*, 108.

52 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 7.

The steampunk forum *BrassGoggles* showed just how popular modding has become when they calculated a breakdown of the number of posts in various topics. Their data revealed that Tactile topics (making and modding items) were by far the most popular, far outweighing fashion, literature, and lifestyle concerns.[53]

Steampunk art and artifacts have also expanded beyond their niche in recent years. The popular website Etsy.com, for example, currently lists 269,731 steampunk items for sale.[54] These include cell phone cases emblazoned with gears, jewelry made out of watch parts, and top hats adorned with industrial goggles. The popularity of steampunk art, particularly the practice of modding, offers telling insight into steampunk's steadily growing appeal. Artists who modify their technology are clearly dissatisfied with their cold, unappealing, mass-produced devices. By encasing them in ornate neo-Victorian exteriors, steampunks seek to imbue their devices with a sense of warmth and character. The desire to change technology to better fit one's needs or aesthetic vision also exists outside of steampunk, as evidenced by the growing popularity of practices such as "jailbreaking" iPhones in order to allow further customization. Steampunk art is just one of the ways that these old-world enthusiasts rebel against contemporary culture. By producing artwork that invokes a romantic past age and modifying their mass-produced devices to encompass quirky old-world charm, they are searching for a sense of individuality in a world that lacks color and character. Modding also allows steampunks embrace the DIY ethos and get their hands dirty like the Victorian inventors they idolize. The tinkering aspect of this craft appeals to the idea of the accessible, humanized machine by allowing steampunks to transform their devices from lifeless metal and plastic to warmer, more accessible devices with a distinctly human touch.

Steampunk art has also manifested itself into fashion — a particularly creative and personal niche. Steampunk clothing consists of Victorian items such as top hats, waistcoats, bow ties, wing-collar shirts, bloomers, corsets, bustles, and elbow-length gloves, and often (but not always) signifiers of science, technology, and engineering such as goggles and aprons.[55] This revival of nineteenth-century fashion can be traced back to a small group of artists,

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53 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 12.

54 "Steampunk Items on Etsy," *Etsy*, accessed May 20, 2014, https://www.etsy.com/search?q=steampunk&ship_to=US.

55 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk,"7

led by Kit Stolen, who produced Victorian-inspired handmade garments in the late 1990s. The style began to gain widespread appeal in the steampunk community when people realized that it could easily be incorporated into their everyday wardrobe.[56] According to Libby Bulloff, the cofounder of Steampunk Magazine, there are two kinds of steampunk fashion: serious cosplayers, con-goers, and reenactors, and "steampunk casual" — everyday clothing that incorporates vintage influences.[57] The rising appeal of steampunk fashion has inspired clothing companies such as Clockwork Couture,[58] independent designers who sell their wares on websites,[59] and online communities devoted to formal and casual steampunk fashion.[60]

The fact that steampunks would willingly don floor-length dresses and corsets may seem rather strange; after all, by modern standards such clothing would seem appallingly restrictive. In a group interview conducted at a steampunk convention, a man named Darren explained his motivation for adopting steampunk fashion:

> If you went to a museum of clothing, you would see distinct styles of Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian Britain, but if you look at fashions nowadays what would we put up? A football shirt, a tracksuit and a pair of jeans with the crotch round the kneecaps? I personally don't like these clothes, and I would rather dress in something that is period and distinct rather than dress in shapeless modern fashion.[61]

It seems, then, that steampunk clothing is more than a stylistic choice: it is also a rebellion against contemporary fashion. Libby Bulloff also commented on the rebellious nature of steampunk fashion. "When you walk down the street in a top hat and spats," she says, "you are causing a riot."[62] Like other subcultures that embrace fashion as a way of defying the norm (goths, punks, hippies, etc.), steampunks are using their outward appearance to make a

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56 Jeff VanderMeer with S.J. Chambers, The Steampunk Bible, 132.

57 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 7.

58 "Steampunk Clothing at Clockwork Couture," *Clockwork Couture*, accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.clockworkcouture.com/.

59 See, for example: "Somnia Romantica," accessed May 20, 2014, https://www.etsy.com/ s.v. "Somnia Romantica."; "MGD Clothing," accessed May 20, 2014, https://www.etsy.com/ s.v. "MGD Clothing."

60 See, for example, "Steampunk Fashion," accessed May 20, 2014, http://steamfashion.livejournal.com/; "Casual Steampunk," accessed May 20, 2014, http://casualsteampunk.tumblr.com/.

61 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 20.

62 Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 45.

powerful statement about themselves and their place in society. Translating the futuristic neo-Victorian clothing worn by the characters in steampunk novels, comics, and art to the real world allows this subculture to further express its individuality. Unlike today's fashion, which consists of nearly identical items churned out by machines in foreign sweatshops and sold in stores to the masses, pre-industrial Victorian clothing was custom-made by hand — a difference that made these garments unique. Embracing old-world clothing allows steampunks to stand out from the crowd and break the chains of normality that limit their ability to truly express themselves.

The steampunk artistic movement has also expanded to the musical realm — a uniquely powerful medium that allows steampunks to celebrate their culture and truly capture its spirit. Steampunk bands began to emerge in conjunction with other artistic developments such as modding and visual art. Steampunk music does not have its own singular style; instead, it combines genres such as cabaret, classical, science fiction film soundtracks, and alternative/underground. One of the earliest examples of a steampunk band is Joshua Pfeiffer's Vernian Process, a project that he established in 2003 to "create music that would accompany steampunk adventures in his own mind."[63] In recent years, steampunk music has expanded to include a wide variety of styles, from burlesque and swing to prog rock and metal. Although its sound is widely variable, steampunk music can be characterized by traits such as theatrical performances, a Gothic or Victorian aesthetic, playfulness and spontaneity combined with grittiness and darkness, and narratives and storytelling.[64] The two most important elements are the band's appearance/stage performance and the narratives in their songs.

Steampunk music allows the genre's themes and whimsical tropes to come vividly to life. One of the most famous and influential steampunk bands that celebrate the genre's vision is Abney Park. In addition to playing modded instruments and donning techno-Victorian fashion, their lyrics tell stories of steampunk adventure and glorify the subculture's message. One of their most popular songs, "Steampunk Revolution," features lines such as, "Your subculture shops at the mall/We build ours with blowtorch, needle, thread, and leather awl" — a clear example of steampunk's defiance of contemporary cul-

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63   Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 15.
64   Ibid., 16.

ture.[65] Another song, "Building Steam," features the refrain "I made my own machine/Yes, we're building steam/I hate the same routine," which alludes to the ever-popular rebellious tinkerer persona.[66] Another unique feature of Abney Park is that they are a "concept band" that performs as members of a pirate airship crew. The idea of band members adopting an imaginary fantasy persona is another common theme embraced by steampunk bands. Another example is Steam Powered Giraffe, whose members adopt personas as robots and don elaborate makeup to bring their characters to life when performing.[67] Like Abney Park, Steam Powered Giraffe produce whimsical songs that tell of grand adventures. One example is "Brass Goggles," which recounts the tale of an explorer who builds a steam-powered mechanical giraffe to battle hostile elephants.[68] Music is a particularly powerful form of artistic expression because it deeply resonates with human emotions. Many rebellious cultural movements, from Britain's punk rockers to Norway's black metal scene, have used music as a means to express themselves and their discontent with society. On a more superficial level, steampunk music's use of fantasy personas and whimsical lyrics contribute to a sense of lighthearted escapism. On a deeper level, it allows messages such as disdain for current technology/society, a longing for the past, and the need for societal change to appeal to a wider audience; after all, it's hard not to be inspired by rousing instrumentals and passionately sung vocals that promote visions of a brighter future.

One of the most obvious examples of steampunk culture's rising popularity is the ever-growing number of steampunk-themed conventions that have sprung up in recent years. Conventions have become a major part of various fandoms, from SF and fantasy to comics and anime. These gatherings allow fans to meet other people with similar interests, buy merchandise, meet celebrities, authors, and other public figures, and otherwise bring their fandom to life. In the past few years, steampunk conventions have begun to join the ranks of other well-established cons. The Science Fiction/Fantasy website Tor.com listed a total of thirty-nine steampunk or "steam-friendly"

65 "Abney Park: Steampunk Revolution Lyrics," *Lyric Wikia*, accessed May 19, 2014, http://lyrics.wikia.com/Abney_Park:Steampunk_Revolution.

66 "Abney Park: Building Steam Lyrics," *Lyric Wikia*, accessed May 19, 2014, http://lyrics.wikia.com/Abney_Park:Building_Steam.

67 "Whut Is Steam Powered Giraffe?" *Steam Powered Giraffe*, accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.steam-poweredgiraffe.com/.

68 "Brass Goggles Lyrics," *Steam Powered Giraffe*, accessed May 20, 2014, http://www.steampoweredgiraffe.com/BGlyrics.html.

conventions and events that occurred worldwide in 2013.[69] Currently, the largest steampunk convention is the Steampunk World's Fair in Piscataway, New Jersey, which features the enticing slogan "A Grand Adventure Awaits!" Their website, which is topped by an illustration of airships floating over the New Jersey skyline, proudly announces the grand exploits they have to offer: vendors, guest speakers, workshops on steampunk and Victorian culture, musical performances, and wonderfully bizarre events such as parasol dueling.[70]

Conventions also offer participants a unique opportunity to truly embrace their fandom: cosplaying. Cosplay is a shortened version of the words costume and play. This practice, which began in Japan and gained widespread popularity in the early 1990s, is "the practice of portraying a fictional character — at times completely identifying as that character while in costume (and thus acting as if the individual was that character to add to the authenticity of the experience)."[71] In the course of their research for *Vintage Tomorrows*, Carrott and Johnson interviewed a group of steampunk cosplayers at Norwescon. One woman remarked that one of the biggest draws of steampunk is that it allows its fans to make their own characters. "It's completely our own," she said, "unlike an anime convention, where you dress up as somebody else." "In steampunk," another woman added, "it is generally expected that you make your own character."[72] Creating a steampunk character involves choosing a persona, name, and backstory and then making a costume that represents the character. A particularly interesting trend has also evolved in which many female steampunk cosplayers choose to wear male or androgynous clothing. This grants them a full range of movement and allows them to participate in the science, technology, and engineering aspects of the genre[73]. Although the Internet has allowed for greater interaction, conventions physically bring people together and enable them to participate in their culture in a more meaningful way. Cosplay embodies the creative aspect of the genre and allows steampunks to express themselves by creating a new persona – a powerful form of escapism from both personal and societal boundaries. If the trend continues, the number of steampunk cons will only increase, thus

69 Ay-Leen the Peacemaker, "Gearing Up for 2013: A Steampunk Convention Listing," accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.tor.com/blogs/2013/01/steampunk-conventions-2013.

70 "The Steampunk World's Fair: The World's Largest Steampunk Event," *Steampunk World's Fair*, May 19, 2014, accessed May 19, 2014, http://steampunkworldsfair.com/.

71 Molly McIsaac, "What Is Cosplay And Why Do People Do It?" *iFanboy*, accessed May 18, 2014, http://ifanboy.com/articles/what-is-cosplay-and-why-do-people-do-it/.

72 Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 166.

73 Cherry and Mellins, "Negotiating the Punk in Steampunk," 21.

further expanding its fanbase and broader cultural influence.

Perhaps the greatest testament to steampunk's rising popularity is its ever-increasing influence on mainstream culture. The trend of fandoms branching out into society at large is not a new phenomenon; many other fan cultures, from *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings* to the more recent *Game of Thrones*, have made appearances in areas outside their niche as a result of a widening fanbase. In the past few years, steampunk has followed a similar trend. Some examples include articles in the *Los Angeles Times, Time, The Guardian*, and *The Ottawa Citizen*, a steampunk art and design show hosted at Oxford University's Museum of the History of Science,[74] and a Prada Fall/Winter steampunk-inspired menswear collection.[75] Steampunk has also begun to infiltrate pop culture. Tory Spelling, for example, planned a steampunk wedding on network television, and A*merica's Next Top Model* aired an episode with a steampunk-themed photo shoot in which models donned corsets and goggles. [76] Steampunk has even branched out into the mainstream music scene. In 2011, teenage heartthrob Justin Bieber released a music video titled "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town (Arthur Christmas Version)."[77] The video shows Bieber, who is dressed in Victorian attire and goggles and sports a brass mechanical arm, in a toy workshop that resembles a romanticized Victorian factory. The video clearly emphasizes the neo-Victorian technology in this workshop, with numerous close-up shots of grinding gears, smoking pipes, complicated lever systems, and a female automaton. In the course of his research for *Vintage Tomorrows*, Brian Johnson arranged an interview with Bieber's manager, Scooter, to discover his inspiration for this project. Scooter said that he had first become aware of steampunk after watching a dance troupe perform at his thirtieth birthday party. Impressed by their "cool" aesthetic, he began to research the genre and realized that it would be a perfect theme for Bieber's latest video — a song used in the movie *Arthur Christmas*, which, like steampunk, blends the old and the new.[78] Undoubtedly inspired by the Bieber's success, David Guetta and Nicki Minaj also released a steampunk-inspired music video the following month. Their video "Turn Me On" features tropes such as Nicki Minaj as a beautiful cyborg, a

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74   Bowser and Croxall, "Introduction," 12.

75   Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows*, 282.

76   Ibid.

77   Justin Bieber, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town (Arthur Christmas Version)," directed by Alice Brooks, accessed May 3, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/ s.v. "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town (Arthur Christmas Version)."

78   Carrott and Johnson, *Vintage Tomorrows,* 277.

neo-Victorian scientist's workshop, and people riding horses through cobble-stone streets.[79] These are just a few examples of how steampunk is steadily making its way into the mainstream consciousness. The steampunk aesthetic is not only unusual and distinct; it is also, as Scooter said, "cool." Steampunk represents a world that seems vibrant and alive compared to our own; it conveys a sense of adventure and straying from the norm. In this sense, steampunk offers a tantalizing image of the future: a world that blends the advancement of our modern age with the charm of days gone by.

Thus concludes our examination of the emergence of steampunk as a cultural phenomenon — but this is far from the end of the story. If the trend we have seen in the last decade continues, steampunk will continue to gain popularity and attract the attention of an even wider audience. The most important thing to consider in examining steampunk's rising popularity — like all other cultural movements — is what this trend can reveal about society. Many people are beginning to feel overwhelmed by an ever-increasing influx of advancement and technology — so much so that these developments have largely lost their excitement. Steampunk represents a rebellion against the mass-produced, cold, inaccessible technology that has infiltrated our lives and the apathetic society that it has contributed to. Steampunk advocates a future that combines the elements of a romanticized past with futuristic advancements to create a world of progress that does not lose its sense of humanity. Perhaps as steampunk continues to grow this desire will become more mainstream, allowing its adherents to translate these ideas to the real world and build a brighter future.

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79   David Guetta, "Turn Me On ft. Nicki Minaj," directed by David Guetta, accessed May 3, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/ s.v. "David Guetta – Turn Me On ft. Nicki Minaj."

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