

Interview



The Genius of Phil and Kaja Foglio

Jennifer Wylie*
with Phil and Kaja Foglio



The creative team behind the "Girl Genius" webcomic discusses how they costume their characters, and why they call their series, "Gaslamp Fantasy", and not "Steampunk".

Phil and Kaja Foglio are the well-known husband and wife team who draw, write, and produce the comic book series, *Girl Genius*, whose tagline is "Adventure, Romance, MAD SCIENCE!".

Girl Genius features a female lead character in an alternate-history Victorian-style "Steampunk" setting, although

Editors Note

Phil Foglio won the Hugo Award for Best Fan Artist in 1977 and 1978. He was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist in 2008. He and Kaja won the first graphic story Hugo for *Girl Genius, Volume 8: Agatha Heterodyne and the Chapel of Bones*.

elements veer from what is usually thought of as Steampunk. Kaja describes it as "Gaslamp Fantasy" to suggest its more fantastic style.

If you aren't familiar with the series, you might want to take a look at it on their web site, starting with the

[first issue](#), which

premiered on November 4, 2002. The rest of us will wait for you...



Welcome back!
Pretty cool, isn't it?

Phil and Kaja are often interviewed about how they got started, where they came up with the idea for the series, where they get their ideas from, and almost every aspect of their art – except one.

In this second part of my interview (see [Virtual Costumer, Volume 8, Issue 1](#)), I talk with them about costuming in the series: what goes on in their heads about why their characters wear what they wear, and what they think of all the fans who dress as characters in the *Girl Genius* world.

*For the benefit of those who are new to the *Girl Genius* series, give me your best 30-second "convention pitch".*

Phil: It takes place in a world where mad science really exists. It tends to run in families. Our hero, Agatha, discovers that she is the long lost heir of a very famous family of mad scientists, who everyone else thought had been safely wiped out. When they discover that this is not in fact the case, everyone wants to kill her or control her-and hilarity ensues."

When you first started making "Girl Genius", where did you find your costuming inspiration?

Phil: Victorian fashions, Napoleonic military uniforms, European folk costumes.

Kaja: I had been sorting through a lot of old sketches and noticed that Phil seemed to like drawing airships and weird creatures with walking sticks and old-fashioned clothes, but that stuff hardly ever made it into his final work. I've got a bit of a mania for that sort of thing myself, so it seemed a good idea to make a story that we could hang that look on.

Why did you call it "Girl Genius", and how did "Agatha" come about?

Kaja: I had been drawing mad science girls for a while at that point, but this picture



of Agatha (left) marks the actual day that Phil came up with the title "Girl Genius" and the name "Agatha Heterodyne." At that point, it was supposed to be a sort of near-

future adventure, with Agatha as the descendant of Phil's old Heterodyne Boys characters. I like the "Gaslamp Fantasy" (cough, cough, Steampunk...) setting better, myself.

Kaja, you coined the term, "Gaslamp Fantasy", so tell us about it, and why you distinguish it from "Steampunk".

Kaja: Around the time we were bringing out *Girl Genius*, there was a comic called *Steampunk* and I didn't want any confusion. I've also never liked the term for our work. It's derived from Cyberpunk (a term which I think actually fits its genre well) but we have no punk, and we have more than just steam. I felt a bit foolish when I found that I had mis-remembered a term from the forward to an H. Rider Haggard book and came up with "Gaslamp Fantasy", but it works and I like it.

What do you think about the recent Steampunk phenomenon?

Phil: We think it's hysterical. It's not new; it's been around for 100 years. It started with Jules Verne and Tom Swift. It's just that the term 'Steampunk' was invented

in the 80's to typify the literature. As Kaja said, we don't think of *Girl Genius* as Steampunk. People say we helped jump-start the genre, I don't think that. I think we were just a gateway.

What is each of your favorite Girl Genius costume?

Phil: I am ridiculously fond of Krosp in his little coat. I will (and have) put the rest of the characters in a variety of outfits, but Krosp will be in that coat forever.



Kaja: Anything Agatha – SCIENCE!

What's the most difficult Girl Genius costume to draw?

Phil: Zeetha's original outfit. I know it's not particularly complicated, but it always gave me trouble. The hardest part is the curve of her sword handles, which of course, is the one element I couldn't get rid of.



Now that Girl Genius is updated on the website frequently, is it easier or more difficult to keep up with what the characters are wearing?

Phil: Pretty much the same. I have style sheets for all the characters, and of course I have the previous pages to refer to.

Do you draw the entire strip by hand?

Phil: Yes. I've tried to work on a Wacom tablet and such. My colorist, Cheyenne, is just a whiz at that, and he makes it look so easy, damn him. I'm just an old-fashioned paper guy. And that gives me originals to sell later, so there's an economic reason to keep doing it this way.

What do you think about costumes inspired by Girl Genius at conventions?

Kaja: We see the most amazing cosplay at conventions, even at anime conventions, and that's saying something. In anime, there are a lot of great characters to choose from, cosplay-wise. So I think our readers are already doing a lot just with their enjoyment of what we do.



Have you met someone who has made a costume based on the world of Girl Genius, rather than a specific character?

Phil: Oh my gosh, yes! Lots of them. We think it's great!

Phil, do you see many Girl Genius costumes in masquerades that you've emceed at conventions like ComicCon, WorldCon, and WonderCon?

Phil: Surprisingly few. We've seen hundreds of Girl Genius themed hall costumes at conventions, and people send us pictures via e-mail, but stuff at shows we've emceed at? Not very many at all.

Would you ever consider making a Girl Genius movie? If so would you prefer it to be costumed live action, or animation?

Kaja: Sure, if the right people came along, it would be fun to do a movie. It would have to be the right people, though, a really good team. Live action movies are often... not so good. So I can wait for that if I have to. It's a good thing too, since nobody's breaking down the door... I personally would like to see it as a well-done long-form anime series.

You sell Girl Genius merchandise on your Studio Foglio web site, including, at one point, goggles. I heard that you have a funny story about them. Could you tell it?

Phil: Sure. This guy came through our hometown of Seattle, from the distributor, trying to sell us more goggles. He showed us all the other models they carried. We said,



Photo by [Jim Mourgos](#), WonderCon 2009.

“no, all those other goggles are too modern and industrial looking”. “But,” he said, “you're the biggest retailer for goggles in Seattle! Surely, you do a lot of welding.” “No,” I told him, “we sell them to our fans - costumers and sci-fi fans.” “Ooohh...,” he said, “so they do a lot of welding?”

What do you think about all the enthusiasm from fans for Girl Genius since you started publishing it on the Web?

Phil: We abandoned publishing periodical-style comic books and began publishing online in April 2005 as a free

“webcomic”, updated three times a week. We just couldn't afford the printing costs at that point. By November 2005 the number of readers quadrupled, and we tripled our sales of traditional comics and related merchandise. You just never know.

Kaja: We're just so happy with the readership we have now, and with the great feedback we've been getting. The level of enthusiasm is incredible. That's really what is helping make the comic so popular!

Jennifer Wylie is a sci-fi and fantasy costumer who is a fan of a number of genres, including Girl Genius and Dr. Who. She has been the masquerade director for Silicon, and was recently masquerade co-director for Gallifrey 2010.

Phil Foglio is a Hugo-award winning cartoonist and comic book artist. He draws and co-writes the “Girl Genius” series with his wife, Kaja. Previously, he illustrated the “MythAdventures” series of fantasy novels by Robert Lynn Asprin, and adapted the first one a comic-book series.

Kaja Foglio is a Hugo-award winning artist, writer and publisher. She illustrates and co-writes the “Girl Genius” series with her husband, Phil. Previously, she illustrated the omnibus edition of Barry Hughart's “The Chronicles of Master Li” and “Number Ten Ox”.

For more information about their work, visit their [Studio Foglio](#) web site.