

Virtual Soapbox



Photo by Shawn Sulma

Just Because It Has Gears Doesn't Make It Steampunk *Bryan Little**

A noted costumer and prop maker shares his perspective on why Steampunk is much richer and more complex than the usual gratuitous grab bag of gears and goggles.

Before I rant about gears in Steampunk, maybe it would help my cause to explain that Steampunk is a genre that stems from many sources. It mainly has a literary origin, deriving much of its style and imagery from pioneers of science fiction, like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

Given the age of the genre, there are now so many takes on it that it becomes nearly impossible to present a universally accepted definition.

The genre is, at its heart, a romanticized, never-was future of the Industrial Revolution. It is a near limitless canvas to paint on, so there are an increasing number of diverging Steampunk styles. Some take the fantasy route using a made-up type of fuel or technology that powers the engines and gadgets of their universe.

Others take the more scientific route and try to make their Steampunk technology a natural extension of the technology that existed at the time, like the steam engines that propelled the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain in the later part of the 19th century.



Illustration by Bryan Little.

I want to focus on the costuming aspect of Steampunk. This retro-futuristic look, is just a cornerstone of the now well established Steampunk genre, or what for the sake of an argument I will call the "Steam Punk Revolution" (SPR) for short.

The SPR relies on, or rather borrows heavily from, the steam engine technology. But while the Industrial Revolution steam engines often filled entire rooms, today's

Steampunk costumes scale down the technology to wearable size by necessity.

Some of the genre applies modern concepts of machines and technology to Victorian Era design. The genre also borrows heavily from Nikola Tesla who was so ahead of his time, he would have fit neatly into its retro-futuristic sensibility today.

In other words Steampunk comes out of the late 19th century to early 20th century dress or uniform, decorated or enhanced with future technology in a retro design. This could be subtle detailing on clothing, or going as far as integrating large steam powered machines as wearable devices. There are boundless possibilities and few rules, which is what makes it such an attractive genre.

This is why I sometimes foam at the mouth when I see some of the Steampunk costumes around conventions. Many of the costumes seem to both miss an opportunity, and the point, altogether. There are so many abominations in Steampunk costuming that it will be hard to cover them all, but here are three of my pet peeves:

Gears

I'll start with my personal favorite: Gears! What? Huh? What in "Tesla's ball-bearings" are you talking about! You heard me, GEARS!

If you glue gears to your hat or corset, you are saying to the costuming community



that you have less grasp of steam technology than a concussed rabbit. People with gears glued to their hat aren't conveying the concept of

the Victorian Industrial Revolution, they're conveying the concept of an Idiot with a gear on his head!

Make the gears DO SOMETHING! Bedazzling your clothing with machine parts (or as I call it, "Begearing"), does not mean anything other than a visual association with machines in general.

Gears do not have an exclusive connection to steam engines. The modern internal combustion engine also uses gears, for example, to drive the chain that moves the engine! Having gears does not make it steam related! I can only guess that the costuming community reaches for gears because they were more exposed in the machinery of the Industrialized Victorian Era.



If gears served a purpose and had a practical application, such as mounted on a



wooden box that appears to be part of some machinery in the box, and the box was detailed in brass and maybe leather, in a style appropriate for

the Victorian Era, you would annoy me far less.

Goggles

Why is EVERYONE protecting their eyes? What in the Steampunk universe is so dangerous to the eyes?

Are all the steam powered devices that Steampunkers are wielding so dangerous that there is a fear of them exploding all the time? Is everyone wearing goggles because someone's machine might explode?



Unless you are driving your car without a windscreen through the convention hotel, then take off the goggles. Wearing goggles indoors is like wearing your coat in the swimming pool!

General Inconsistency

Random clothing mishmash of eras and styles, that just barely approximates the



general aesthetic is not really upholding the concept of Steampunk. It is, to quote a friend of mine "Lazypunk"!

The genre is exciting when costumers are

being innovative and applying retro-styled spins on current technology to a costume or a prop in a new and interesting way, or finding some retro application of a modern idea.

In conclusion, don't just keep copying what every one else is doing. Be innovative. Do something new. Take a concept and run with it. I know I'm not alone in this opinion Please stop the cookie-cutter Steampunk invasion!

Bryan Little is a sci-fi/fantasy costumer who often builds costumes that involve props, special effects helmets, and construction materials like Wonderflex and metal resins. He especially enjoys costuming for the world of "Dr. Who".