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Full Steam Ahead:

Does Steampunk have what it takes to carry mass appeal?

When you think of science fiction you think of space or time travel. But one thing they have in common is it involves futuristic technology. With its shiny lights and fancy screens, future technology has come to be adored by all. But there is one subgenre that does not rely on those tropes to create amazing stories. Steampunk’s the name and well, steam is its game. With interesting settings and very robust characters what exactly makes steampunk so compelling? Could it be its root in historical fantasy, or could it be the technology is so retro yet futuristic. With this that make it so interesting why is it mostly ignored by the common eye? It puts into question whether or not Steampunk even has what it takes to even become a popular sub-genre. All the parts are there so where does it fail?

Steampunk is a marvelous genre. Taking its roots in the middle of the Victorian era where the industrial revolution began to flourish. Steam has begun to meld its way into becoming the main source of energy. While electricity existed at the time it was not considered as a viable technology until it was massively spread out. With steam it was a viable source of energy and it was already placed in many aspects of life. Everything was using steam from boats, to ships, even the creation railway system relied on steam. Changing the manufacturing process in factories from handmade to machines. But this is not what makes steampunk special.

In 1822 the English Mathematician Charles Babbage had an idea for a machine that would perform mathematical calculations rapidly and infallibly. This was long before the age of electrical circuitry, so Babbage’s plan called for the machine to be executed in brass and steel and powered by a hand crank. If it had been completed, his Difference Engine would have been a magnificent beast, requiring 25,000 parts and weighing about 15 tons. But he ran out of money and patience and had to abandon it unfinished. (Times 1)

Imagine, if you will, if Charles would have continued his work with his machine. What could have been the outcome of his work? Would technology as we see today still come to fruition. Or would the technology that we see today be less shiny and brassier. Generally Steampunk stories follow this principle. How would technology work of we would have continued to work on steam based technologies instead of moving on. The idea of not creating things with shiny lights but more tungsten, less plastics and more metal.

In the last century technology has evolved at an alarming rate. The need for steam has greatly if not completely disappeared from our lives. With this in mind most writers questioned how would modern technology look like if it created during Victorian era? In order to understand this we had to figure out what exactly is viable in this genre. Surprisingly everything does not need to be hooked up to a steam engine. Existing technologies did not magically disappear. Electricity had already been discovered, so seeing electronic devices in the genre is not strange. Most cases steam would be used to generate the electricity. Weaponry while may not seem important still aids in solving conflicts. Especially if the story takes place in the Wild West. You would have hidden blades in swords and mostly consisted of single shot weapons. The reason for this is revolvers added character especially for the era (Which I will get back to later). It is possible to see advancements in technology like the introduction of the automatic rifle or machine gun.

While future technology does not seem farfetched, one example that just screams science fiction are Automatons. “An automaton is a self-operating machine (an autonomous robot). They could be anything from elaborate clockwork singing birds… to robot servants” (suzannelazear 1). It may seem impossible to think that robots would exist with this kind technology. Just think about it for a moment. What exactly is needed for a robot to move at its most basic level? It would need gears, pistons and whatnot. Things that already existed at the time. The beauty of what makes this genre so interesting is that many things in the technology area is open to the writers to decide, even the idea an autonomous robot able to think on its own without modern computing. That being said just like everything that does not seem possible, the all-powerful deus ex machina comes in the save the day. Aether the all-powerful element capable to many things like giving a mind to a robotic body (Lazear).

While the technology in steampunk is not as important as say the story itself, the role it plays lies more on whether or not it can be a valid story within the genre of science fiction. Take for instance a game called *Bioshock Infinite,* in it you take control of a character that gets shot up into a flying city. At first glance it may not seem probable, but the explanation is massive balloons filled with helium. With a valid explanation it becomes acceptable. The reason for this lies within the genre.

Science fiction take our current understanding of how the universe worlds and imagines ideas and technologies that we haven’t seen yet but still could fit within that understanding. It’s fiction that expands on what we know about science, operation on familiar principles. (Willson)

This definition creates a wide gray area on what can be valid or not. The simple idea of whether or not a robot would be possible with the technology at hand is not a matter for debate. What matters is if it’s a possibility, and that is entirely up to the author. But just accepting the “It’s my story I do what I want” excuse is not that simple. Time and time again many stories are plagued with the idea of creating a powerful item that solved all issues in an instant. I mentioned it before, the ever popular ex machina. While some are really good (Bacteria that kills the invaders in war of the worlds), and some are just plain bad (Ultimate controlling super computer in the matrix). How you chose to utilize them will affect the mass appeal of your story.

The Victorian Era, while not all stories take place in Great Britain itself. It’s more of a name for the time period stories within the steampunk genre take place. This in references creates the setting and the style of clothing people wore. Most fans take this part the most. “People don’t dress steampunk, they come up with a character” (Strickland). While most steampunk clothing is less frilly dress, and more wild western design. The time period still remains the same. Fans will still have so much fun dressing up. You would see many fans adopting personas for the characters they have created. Conversing with each other with proper etiquette. Where the term speaking like a gentleman would come into play. Creating wonderful costumes either with heavy brass and clockwork or even just your basic slacks and vest. It’s possible to see people mount steam boilers on their backs to further emphasize the play on steam. While this may not seem like an interesting time period, it does create refreshing interactions.

Most travel is done via horse and carriage, so time between events tends to be longer. This gives writers more time to create and build up to these events instead of the usual “The next day.” Battles between characters tend to last longer because it would either involve sword fighting or single shot weapons. But you what would find interesting is the gadgetry. The biggest example is the movie *Wild Wild West.* Within it you have a highly decked out steam train that has all the bells and whistles you can think of. You have spring loaded platforms, Opening floors. Anything you can think of. It would be possible to create a retro spy movie where you have all these retro counterparts for futuristic gadgetry. And it could be the running gag of the story.

One aspect of Steampunk genre that makes stories quite interesting is integration of historical figures and characters. The idea of exploring what if, while also interacting with popular historical figures makes this quite enticing. Let’s take Abraham Lincoln for example. He is the only president with an active invention patent (Quercia). While it may not be the most interesting patent it still creates the possibility of him being an avid inventor of the time. Most steampunk stories delve in what if and pull stops from historical fiction. One game in particular is *Codename S.T.E.A.M* . In codename steam you are in control of small regimen army lead by Abraham Lincoln who faked his death in order to combat an upcoming alien menace. All with the power of steam. This all just sounds amazing and convoluted. When historical figures are involved is usually gets crazy. Let’s just say in this game you are also accompanied by tom sawyer, Sacagawea, and cowardly lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. There’s also involvement with Dracula and his hunter Van Hellsing. But that would fall more into the side of fantasy unless you merge the two like the anime *Hellsing.*

While just endlessly giving you examples of popular media within the subgenre it does not help to get my point across. The possibility of why it has not come into major pop-culture could be attributed to the fans just not caring. They continue to enjoy what they do either through existing media or even creating it themselves. That’s what makes this subgenre so unique. While you could see sprinkles of the subgenre in modern stories seeing it in full glory is going to take some time. Steampunk still has not reached its full potential of offering intuitive stories and that is quite alright. So if you enjoy dressing if you were part of the Victorian Era, or enjoy taking modern computers and giving them a full makeover to fit more into the time period. Steampunk could be a strong contender of becoming popular. And with the new star wars movies coming about, it’s possible those can flop and something new can take over.

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