

THE GAZERO

ISSUE 1



TAKING THE PULSE OF THE GAMING SCENE

STEAMPUNK!

AKA PUT AWAY THOSE GOGGLES, AND
SIT AND HAVE A NICE CUP OF TEA IN-
STEAD.

By Baz Nugent

Steampunk is traditionally classed as a sub-genre of science fiction, specifically retro-futurism. There are advanced machines and alternative, even unfeasible technology (most commonly powered by steam, be it magical or good old fashioned coal driven). It usually takes place in either the late 19th Century, early 20th Century, or some fantasy setting that might as well be one of those two. That's not a bad definition but it's short of the mark.

VICTORIANA! - QUEEN, COUNTRY, AND KEEPING FUZZY WUZZY DOWN

Big machines are part of Steampunk, but what's more important than the machines is the mentality behind them. The Victorian age was a time of scientific innovation, with the world going from the rudiments of steam at the beginning of the era, to the first rough notions of electronics by its end. This wasn't driven by an altruistic desire for the betterment of mankind. To the Victorians, England was the centre of the world, and British values sit squarely at the core of that. This is a time of the genteel delusion that an amateur gentleman is better than a trained pleb, and that 'blood will show'.

It's very easy to ignore these elements, and of course the GM and players are free to do so, but Victoriana is the root of Steampunk. It is a time of unspoken decadence and public outcries as gentlemen visit brothels and opium dens, then decry said places in parliament or in the cheap press. It is not yet the time of ascendancy for America - that country is still rough and ready, a frontier country where men go to start new lives, and for much of the Victorian era is embroiled in war, be it against the Native Americans, the British or their own civil war. It is not much better to be Irish, either a barely tolerated labourer or soldier, or seen as Fenian dissident and petty criminal. 'Lessers' know their place and any who seek to upset the social order can expect tut-tutting or even a good thrashing. This racism can be depicted as being realistic and historical, or perhaps directed at machines, animal hybrids or the fantastical faerie creatures who also inhabit the world.



And of course, there is the sexism. Back into the kitchen ladies; unless you're the queen, you're a man's property. The alternative is a casual disregard for historical realism, or as I prefer, a constant parade of apoplectic men who can't fathom women in trousers, let alone women being heroic. Universal suffrage has its roots in this era but it's still some time off, simply because those in power in this era think keeping the vote from women is for their own good.

LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY, SOMETHING SOMETHING ELSE

Britain rides high as the world's greatest superpower, and that's what drives innovation and progress - being better than all others and not being shy about it. Steampunk is all about 'more is more' - Victorian aesthetics are not subtle or humble. Why build a 10 foot mechanised soldier when a 50 foot one, resplendent as a Knight of Old, complete with shield and lance and a detailed family crest, is possible? Steampunk isn't just about taking modern technology and introducing it 100 years early, powered by coal. A Steampunk motorbike should be half Triumph, half Lectern from Westminster Cathedral with gold inlay and ornate eagle handlebars, possibly with biblical passages engraved onto the mudguards. Robots aren't just machines, but can be pot-bellied potboilers with bowler hats, brass moustaches and a tendency towards pugilism.

A factor that puts Steampunk outside of science-fiction and into science fantasy is the Victorian obsession with the occult. Spiritualism, secret societies and Masonic 'trousers rolled up, knees bent handshakes' can be for working men, noblemen, even mechanical men, and again, more is more - the grand order of fez-wearing Buffalo Wizards are perfectly suitable to the overblown style of Steampunk.

And let us not forget Vampires. This is the time of Gothic Horror, where white women being kidnapped and ravished by rapine foreigners is more terrifying than hundreds dying on the battlefield. Until WWI turns Flanders into killing fields, the vampire will be the epitome of horror. One we now associate with charm and style, but to the Victorian, the vampire was as repugnant as the serial killer he really was - immortality and supernatural power intertwined with sexual repression.

BUT IT'S NOT PULP OR COWBOYS

There are two genres which are close/similar to Steampunk - Dieselpunk and Weird West.

Dieselpunk is similar to Steampunk, arising a little later as a popular genre. Specifically, it uses much of the same anachronistic super technology as Steampunk, but with diesel engines - Steampunk is to Dieselpunk what the Penny Dreadful is to the Pulp Magazines. The gothic Victorian ideals and aesthetics are replaced with smooth understated Art Deco lines and machined parts, while the prevailing ideals are Red Revolution, New Deal and Facism. The supernatural undertones are mostly absent - instead supers are in their infancy.

Weird West is cowboys plus the bizarre. As mentioned earlier, America is not the centre of the world yet. Instead, it's a wild frontier and war-zone. Thomas Edison and Tesla are major figures of retro-futurism, but really they are proto-Dieselpunks, with far more egalitarian notions than their British peers. Steampunk and Weird West can cross-over well, but Steampunk characters in the Wild West will always be tenderfoots, while Weird West characters in Steampunk London will be crass outsiders or a travelling circus.

SO IT'S REALLY...

...all about being British. And a man. And Upper Class. The goggles, cogs and giant robots are all set-dressing, really. Steampunk is a world of Colonial xenophobia, misogyny and elitism, which uses the fantastic to whitewash over historical inaccuracies. Rather than ignoring these factors, I think it's better to include, highlight and parody them as part of your game.

READ, WATCH, LISTEN

Literature:

20,000 Leagues under the Sea (Jules Verne), War of the Worlds and The Invisible Man (HG Wells)

Both excellent authors (I personally prefer Wells as he's a little less scientific and more of a storyteller) who take Victorian ideals and turn them back on their masters. Nemo is a man much smarter and resourceful than those who would "civilise" him. While Griffin...oh Griffin - "This is day one of year one of the new epoch, -- the Epoch of the Invisible Man. I am Invisible Man the First". A magnificent monster.

Comics:

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill)

Read Volume 1 and 2, with 1 being the better of the two. Ignore the later work; apart from the fact that it moves off into different eras, Moore goes a little meta-textual and gets confusing for even the best of us. Read Vol 1's letter pages for some real British Pomp, as the editor insults the female letter writers and Americans with aplomb.

Movies:

Sherlock Holmes and Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows (Dir. Guy Richie. Starring Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law w/ Mark Strong <SH> and Jared Harris<SH:GoS>)

Downey Jr's Bohemian eccentric Great Detective is delightfully mad, and this is the first film I have seen where I have wanted to see more of Jude Law, as the long suffering but dangerously capable Dr. Watson. Excellent to watch with a cheeky amount of Victorian uppityness to boot.

Laputa Castle in the Sky (Dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli)

More Retro-futuristic than Victorian, but the slums and the poverty depicted highlight how unequal that era are/is. There's giant ancient civilisation robots, flying cities and aerial dreadnaughts, not to mention bloomers. Jolly good fun.

Kind Hearts and Coronets (Dir Robert Hamer, starring Dennis Price, Alec Guinness)

There are no robots, flying ships and very few goggles in sight, but this is a delightfully murderous revenge romp, all brought on by pompous gentry exiling their daughter for marrying an Italian. Alec Guinness appears as the entire D'Ascoyne family, who get bumped off in more and more amusing ways, including upon a steam powered battleship. It's set just after the Victorian era but it's Ealing's finest and always worth watching.

Music:

Stay away from 'Steampunk' music, it's generally awful industrial performed by men in silly hats.

Elgar

Pompous, loud and classical. Quintessentially British.

Professor Elemental

Gentleman Rhymer or Chap-Hop, you decide. But this pith-helmeted, ape-butlered fellow, famous for Fighting Trousers and Cup of Brown Joy is whimsical, overblown and all about a proper cuppa.

Gilbert and Sullivan

Deeply silly (especially Pirates of Penzance), it has no giant ships or robots, but it displays how Victorians thought wonderfully, and any admiral who appears in your game should sing that rather famous number. Just to show how very clever he is.