

Running Head: INVESTIGATING STEAMPUNK IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

How a Deeper Understanding of Steampunk Style Will Aid  
Graphic Designers in Transitioning the Style to a Static Form

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DES 5303 | History of Graphic Design

Spring 2011

## Introduction

Mainstream society has likely not *heard* the term Steampunk (“Steampunk infiltrates the mainstream,” MTV video). But, by all accounts, the average person has *seen* Steampunk. The largely artistic subculture style got its start in the 1980s, inspired by the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Its status as a subgenre has meant its mainstream manifestations are sometimes ill received like in the case of “Wild Wild West” (Onion, 2009). Steampunk is set in an alternate history where the technology of the Victorian era never progressed and society was left to utilize steam power and Victorian bells and whistles to accomplish technological advances. Steampunkers, or people who create art in the Steampunk style, create objects consistent with materials found in Victorian times but whose purposes are contemporary—like a laptop decked out with typewriter buttons and other wheels and whistles (Voulangas, 2008). Some Steampunkers live and breathe this neo-Victorian style. The style’s romanticism and intricacies are compelling and fascinating (Onion, 2009; La Ferla, 2008). Whether it is literature, art, or a dining room table, Steampunkers tinker, in their own do-it-yourself style, with technology, its meaning, and the mass-produced, poorly crafted products of contemporary society.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the history, characteristics, and manifestations of Steampunk style in order to better equip graphic designers in their use of the style in a static form. Currently, there is little evidence of mastery of Steampunk style in graphic design. Overwhelmingly, the current examples of

Steampunk graphic design rely too heavily on photorealism, or an attempt to create a tangible object in a static form. This paper will examine Steampunk's origins in literature and its influences on art, film, fashion, and design. The latter will evolve into a discussion involving case studies of Steampunk graphic design. A better understanding of Steampunk history, characteristics, and existing manifestations will help graphic designers explore the use of the style in a static form. This investigation will deal only with how to use Steampunk in a static, non-moving medium. This investigation will also not discuss the use of Steampunk in illustration, which has traditionally followed in the footsteps of film and literature. In other words, illustrators do not suffer from the same issues that graphic designers do because illustrators can appropriately recreate realistic forms in print.

## **Literature Review**

### **Steampunk definition**

Steampunk's status as a subgenre and subculture inherently avoids any attempt at definition or categorization. What is clear, though, is that this emerging art form is and has been object-based and focused on a disdain for today's mass-produced, streamlined products (Gilsdorf, 2010; Moskowitz, 2009). The most purist of Steampunk definitions would be to primarily create a relationship between man and machine (Onion, 2009). Another, oft-repeated definition is less succinct. According to Diana Vick, vice chair of Steamcon, an annual convention in Seattle, Steampunk "is a rejection of the slick, soulless, mass-produced technology of today

and a return to a time when it was ornate and understandable” (Gilsdorf, 2010, para. 10). Vick’s definition is generic but accurate. In its infancy, Steampunk is still reaching for a consensus in definition. Although it began in the 1980s and 1990s, it withdrew to the subculture until as recently as 2007, when it started to receive publicity and garner more attention (Hartwell, 2007).

### Characteristics of Steampunk style

The physical characteristics are vast when it comes to Steampunk—largely due to the style’s varying influences. Those influences include Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Victorian era, cyberpunk, Edwardian era, science fiction, and the do-it-yourself



Figure 1, Alan Rorie

culture. The attitude that comes across from Steampunk work is industrial with a mix of feminine and masculine traits. The hallmark physical trait of the Steampunk style is the use of organic- and industrial-inspired framework (Figure 1). Other primary characteristics include the use of brass, leather, wood, or iron; Victorian fashion elements such as goggles, corsets, high boots, and top hat and coat; anachronism; mechanical parts; and feminine patterns. These physical characteristics manifest in actual physical items, such as jewelry, interior décor, costumes, and film. Steampunk style is seen predominantly in literature, art, film, fashion, and interior design. But its transition to graphic design has been stagnant.

## Examples of Steampunk

### *In literature*

Steampunk's origins reside in literature. Novels by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne primarily influenced the style. Verne's and Wells' novels focused on fantastical machines from alternate realities. A more recent novel, however, "The Difference Engine" by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in 1990 is cited as the style's canonical novel (Jagoda, 2010). The book is based on a real design by Charles Babbage in 1822, which imagines a mechanical computer powered by a hand crank that is capable of computing mathematical functions (Moskowitz, 2009). Several popular novels are set in a typical Steampunk era, such as "Steampunk Trilogy" by Paul Di Filippo and Alan Moore's and Kevin O'Neill's 1999 "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen." From its origins in literature, the style has been reincarnated as an artistic, tangible form.

### *In art*

Steampunk artists create fantastical objects that are mostly anachronistic in nature. The anachronism is largely achieved through artists' use of contemporary items such as laptops, TVs, and motorcycles and combine them with historically accurate materials from the Victorian age. Kinetic



Figure 2, Alan Rorie

Steam Works is one of most well-known art groups and has helped propel Steampunk art to the mainstream art world through the group's

large-scale Steampunk concoctions. Based out of California, Kinetic Steam Works brought themselves to the limelight in 2007 when the group brought its working steam-powered engine as well as their Steampunk Tree House (Figure 2) to Burning Man. These and other manifestations are fantastical creations that seek to create a relationship between man and machine (Onion, 2009). Steampunk creations often do not make it in to the public realm, as evidenced in the little amount of coverage in magazines and newspapers. However, in late 2009 and early 2010, the Museum of History of Science at the University of Oxford held what it billed as the world's first exhibition of Steampunk objects. Seemingly, Steampunk work is just now gaining steam. When the public is greeted with Steampunk, it is often through art. However, the public often sees the style in film, although many times it is subtle (Onion, 2009; Bodley, 2009).

### *In film*

Steampunk's most notable mainstream role was in the 1999 film "Wild Wild West" starring Will Smith. Unfortunately, the film was not terribly popular despite its large budget (Onion, 2009). Other films, such as "League of Extraordinary Gentleman" (2003), were more successful with mainstream audiences (Bodley, 2009). The Steampunk style also emerges in films in more subtle ways, such as the medical thingamajigs used in "Sleepy Hollow" and the time-traveling train in "Back to the Future III" (Bodley, 2009). Researcher Antonie Bodley (2009) is quick to

point out that the manifestations of Steampunk in film vary exponentially. In addition to art and film, Steampunkers have also influenced fashion.

### *In fashion*

Steampunk enthusiasts mostly deploy the style for use as costumes. This manifestation is largely rooted in the subculture of Steampunk. However, despite its status in alternative culture, purveyors of Steampunk fashion seem to blend in or receive subtle but positive curiosity from onlookers (La Ferla, 2008). Avant-garde examples of Steampunk fashion can be found from designers such as Roberto Cavalli, an Italian fashion designer best known for revolutionizing printmaking techniques on leather (Brillson, 2008;



*Figure 3, edmdesigns, Etsy.com*

“Roberto Cavalli,” 2011). On the other hand, accessories like necklaces have entered the mainstream through the explosion of Steampunk artifacts on Etsy.com and other crafter websites (Figure 3). Steampunk manifestations in jewelry utilize materials such as burnished brass and ideas such as the notion of peering into a machine, which is an incarnation of the idea of creating a relationship between man and machine. Steampunk jewelry is by far the most mainstream of all Steampunk objects. However, interior design, too, is gaining ground in mainstream society through publicity and more designers entering the niche genre of Steampunk interior design.

*In interior design*

Interior designers Bruce and Melanie Rosenbaum design Victorian-era homes in a Steampunk fashion (Gilsdorf, 2010). Bruce Rosenbaum's office features portholes, and the team has hidden modern appliances and electronic equipment behind Steampunk art. The lure of Steampunk, according to Bruce, is to make items "ornate and beautiful, rather than boring and unadorned" (as cited in Gilsdorf, 2010, para. 19). Other examples of Steampunk interior design can be



*Figure 4, Because We Can*

found throughout the world, sometimes not by specialized interior design firms like the Rosenbaums'. A popular, publicized example is from the office space of game-design studio Three Rings Design in San Francisco (Figure 4) ("Finding Nemo..." 2007). The office's framework and use of traditional Victorian elements provides a pared-down but still fantastical exploration of the Steampunk style in interior design. While interior design in Steampunk style has enjoyed some press, its counterpart, graphic design, has not enjoyed mainstream use by graphic designers.

### **Graphic design in Steampunk style**

The most likely explanation for why Steampunk graphic design isn't widely used lies in Steampunk's traditional expression as a tangible object—as a dress, a corset, a pocket watch, a necklace, a clock, home decor, and so on. Graphic design's



typical expression as a static form suggests that graphic designers have had difficulty interpreting the style: Do they represent the style as photorealistic as possible or transcend the tangibility and reinterpret the form? Even authors and critics seem confused about the style's representation in graphic design, referring to DIY tinkerers and artists simply as "designers" (Onion, 2009; La Ferla, 2008; Gilsdorf, 2010). Additional investigation into graphic designers' attempts at Steampunk style will further explain the division between tangible and static expressions of Steampunk.

## **Methodology**

### **Case studies**

Through a closer inspection of Steampunk's tangible characteristics, graphic designers can begin to understand how to transition the style to a static medium like graphic design. Graphic designers who have attempted Steampunk tend to stray to a method of trying to recreate these features in a photo-realistic manner. Much of the limited Steampunk graphic design that does exist is in this Photoshopped manner. Steampunkworkshop.com, a notable website dedicated to discussions on Steampunk style, art, and culture, utilizes the Photoshop technique ("Steampunk workshop," n.d.). In fact, a cursory glance at Google results from "Steampunk" reveals that it is the second result after Wikipedia. This is significant, in that the website stands as a voice for the community, yet the design of the site reveals a less evolved version of Steampunk in a graphic design form. To combat and reflect on

whether this design approach is appropriate or successful, several examples of Steampunk graphic design will be explored. Some are effective, evolved examples while others are indicative of this over-Photoshopped technique. These case studies will benefit designers in seeing the potential of a reinterpretation of the traits of Steampunk.

*Case study 1: League of S.T.E.A.M*

The League of S.T.E.A.M. is a well-known group of performers and experts on Steampunk style. They have consulted on projects such as the music video for Panic! At the Disco's "Ballad of the Mona Lisa" music video, for which they produced much of the costuming and other set-design elements ("League of S.T.E.A.M, n.d.). While experts on the Steampunk way of life,



*Figure 5, League of S.T.E.A.M*

their poster designs are hit or miss. Two examples of posters done by the league will be explored in order to illustrate the difficulty that graphic designers have had in transitioning the Steampunk style to a static form. If one of the most well-known Steampunk groups is communicating conflicting graphic design in the Steampunk style, then it becomes even more difficult for the everyday graphic designer to adopt the style. The first example is a promotional poster advertising the members of the troupe (Figure 5). The promotion was mostly successful because it utilized a pared down treatment of the common characteristics of Steampunk, such as the dirty

Victorian patterned backdrop and refined grunge type. It didn't rely on a photorealistic treatment, although the portraits of the members *did* promote the physical elements of Steampunk, such as leather, smoke, goggles, and thingamajigs like the one the man has holstered on his back. The poster gives an accurate sense of Steampunk while not relying on trying to reproduce a literal "feel" of the style.

The second example from League of S.T.E.A.M. is also a poster but instead of toeing the line between photorealism and representing the "feel" of Steampunk, this second poster is a mish-mash of Art Nouveau, wood-type poster, and grunge. It also misses on other basic graphic design levels such as balance and overall use of typography. It is worthwhile to note that, typically, masters of Steampunk fashion, art, and the way of life generally fail to translate their mastery to graphic design, much like the design of Steampunkworkshop.com.



Figure 6, League of S.T.E.A.M

#### Case Study 2, 3, and 4: Less effective examples of Steampunk graphic design

As previously mentioned, the Museum of the History of Science held the first museum exhibition of Steampunk design in late 2009 through early 2010. The poster advertising the exhibition fell flat (Figure 7). The



Figure 7, Museum of the History of Science

border “held together” with screws is gimmicky and poorly executed, whereas a few elements within the container are more effective but under-utilized. The Victorian pattern backdrop is stunning but overshadowed by the snorkel equipment, a common Steampunk product. While it is important to display materials found within the exhibit, the overall design missed the mark. Its ineffectiveness fell to its use of gimmicky elements such as the screws on the outside border and the flat background behind it, and the Photoshopped “steel” text—a misappropriation of Steampunk style, which uses more wood- or brass-inspired elements. It is worthwhile to note that the graphic designer seemed to have struggled to connect the photo with the remainder of the design. This could be due to poor mastery among the graphic design community in the Steampunk style.

A second example of ineffective Steampunk graphic design is the cover art for the anthology of stories “Steampunk’d” (Figure 8). The overall design employs the “Photoshop strategy,” or a reliance on photorealism. The photos and text within the photorealistic container do little to relate to the overall design. It is evident in this example that the designer attempted to make the cover art an object. What that

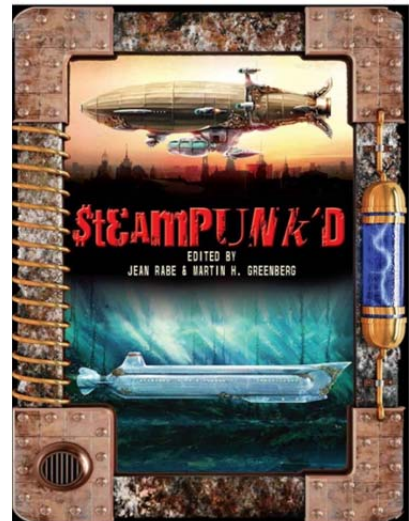


Figure 8, Amazon.com

object is supposed to be, however, is uncertain. It would have been more effective if the design had strayed from the other genres of Steampunk that can feasibly make physical objects.

A third example of ineffective Steampunk graphic design comes in the form of yet another poster. This poster is for popular Steampunk band Abney Park. This promotion for the band employs different characteristics than the previous two examples in that it doesn't quite attempt to be photorealistic. It, in most professional graphic design circles, would not be considered effective graphic design regardless of its use of Steampunk



Figure 9, Abney Park

elements, but it was chosen here because it reflects the problem in Steampunk graphic design: an identity crisis. The sunrays in the background are overused elements in gimmicky modern graphic design. The designer's choices are important to note because, ultimately, this poster is a prime example of common Steampunk graphic choices. Steampunk's numerous influences carry a burden of overwhelming what is already an extremely eclectic mix of attitudes and styles.

Mistakes that graphic designers make in the application of Steampunk style ultimately reflect an identity crisis. Designers should take note of the core characteristics of the style and evolve the style from there. It is not always appropriate to rely on photorealism because of the predominance of the objective realizations of Steampunk style. However, there are examples of effective, evolved forms of Steampunk graphic design; below are three additional case studies.

*Case studies 6, 7, and 8: Examples of effective graphic design*

Paul Sizer, self-proclaimed graphic designer and illustrator of “industrial strength art and design,” according to his website [www.PaulSizer.com](http://www.PaulSizer.com), designed this Batman poster in response to a call from comic book writer Warren Ellis to design

Steampunk posters for never-made Batman films (Figure 10) Sizer’s interpretation of Steampunk predominantly utilizes one of the core inspirations for Steampunk, Art Deco. The type, simplified geometric forms all relate to an Art Deco style, yet retain the feel of Steampunk. Sizer’s poster was among the best executed and most thoughtful because it transcended traditional elements of Steampunk yet retained the “feel” of a Steampunk machine. Sizer achieves this through texture and

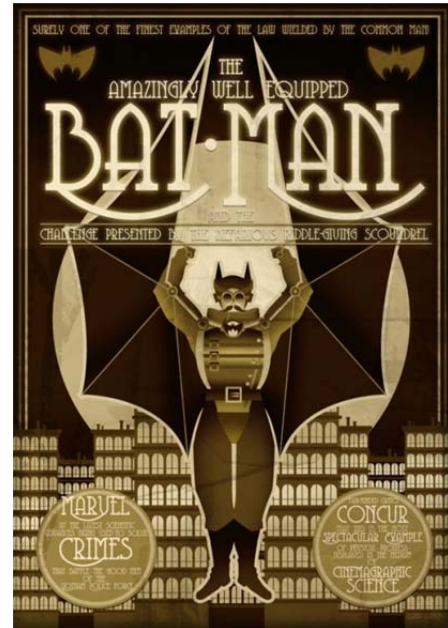


Figure 10, Paul Sizer’s Steampunk Batman poster for Warren Ellis Steampunk film-poster competition

the Batman character, who does not appear as the traditionally slick and cloaked Batman but instead is wearing Steampunk goggles, a metal vest, and strapped on wings. The character, therefore, is portrayed more as a *machine* than a *man*. This closely aligns with the common thread in Steampunk: communicating a relationship between man and machine. In addition, an extreme refinement of the elements of a machine is seen in the lighting effects in the type and windows of the buildings. This treatment is indicative of the Victorian era, which was transitioning from relying on lighting by lanterns to lighting by electricity. The lighting is also significant because it portrays, again, a relationship with machines. Steampunk artists typically use

light-up buttons used on Victorian machines. Sizer has evolved the object-based presentation of lights in Steampunk art to a static form on a poster. Sizer's poster is an extremely worthwhile step for the graphic design industry to better understand Steampunk style because it moves beyond an attempt to provide photorealistic treatments of Steampunk form.

Another unique incarnation of Steampunk graphic design is Dave Veloz's Mac Mini Mod (Figure 11). Here, Veloz has created a tangible product that utilizes graphic design. It is an interesting, if not unprecedented, exploration of how graphic design can intersect with the object-based manifestation of the Steampunk style. This graphic production has been refined to a point of beautiful simplicity that still is very much "Steampunk." The slight touches of ornateness, Victorian-inspired fonts, and mix of wood and black retain the literal Steampunk feel.



Figure 11, Dave Veloz's Mac Mini Mod, as seen on [Steampunkworkshop.com](http://Steampunkworkshop.com)

The third and final example is of a Steampunk bandanna designed by Etsy shop Ratchet, based out of Portland, Oregon (Figure 12). This example is unique in that has elevated the craft of using mechanical elements in Steampunk. Here, the designer has united traditional Victorian flourishes with Steampunk-edged mechanical parts. The design



Figure 12, Ratchet, [Etsy.com](http://Etsy.com)

transcends traditional physical forms of Steampunk and shows a static version of the style. In the end, the design communicates the “feel” of a machine.

### **Conclusion**

Through the case studies, lessons can be gleaned for graphic designers to apply in their work. Ultimately, the more successful examples of Steampunk graphic design break down the elements of traditional Steampunk objects and move them to a static form while still retaining the feel of a bygone era. In Sizer’s poster, he has broken down elements of a machine that can translate in print, such as the light that emanates from a machine. Sizer also found a way to convey the idea of man and machine through his Batman character, which he evolved into a man/machine. Batman no longer wore a cap and had superpowers. Sizer’s version was a man with mechanical wings, and seemingly no superpowers. In addition, Sizer utilized a subtle texture to convey a greasy, dirty machine. The Ratchet bandanna altered existing, traditional graphic design components of Victorian design (flourishes) and combined it with traditional components of Steampunk design (mechanical wheels). Veloz’s Mac Mini combined a traditional graphic design medium with Steampunk’s traditional expression as a tangible object. There seems to be potential for graphic designers to apply Steampunk style in package design, as evidenced by Veloz’s take on the Mac Mini.

In all, there seem to be two overall lessons that graphic designers can take from this examination of the Steampunk style. First, more successful examples of



Steampunk graphic design lie in the idea of communicating the feel of a machine while not relying on traditional physical forms found within said machine (wheels, levers, and so on). In Spizer's Batman poster and in the Ratchet bandanna, the designers have reinterpreted the machine. Spizer in particular, has pared down and refined the feel of a machine by using light. Spizer's poster communicates a relationship with a machine without attempting a literal interpretation of machine lighting. And Veloz's Mac Mini toes the line between Steampunk art and product and Steampunk graphic design.

A second suggestion to the graphic design industry is to consider the true nature of Steampunk: authentic materials from the Victorian era mixed with modern technology. If that idea were taken literally, then graphic designers may want to consider how to mix old-world materials and technology with modern techniques in printing and production. Perhaps, according to a purist, the only true Steampunk graphic design could result from the use of Victorian-period materials and production and modern elements such as four-color photos and vector artwork. In this vein then, wood-type printing, for instance, would be appropriate.

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