Steam Wars

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Abstract:
While steampunk continues to defy definition, this article seeks to identify a coherent understanding of steampunk as an aesthetic. By comparing and contrasting well-known cultural icons of George Lucas's *Star Wars* with their steampunk counterparts, insightful features of the steampunk aesthetic are suggested. This article engages in a close reading of individual artworks by digital artists who took part in a challenge issued on the forums of *CGSociety* (Computer Graphics Society) to apply a steampunk style to the Star Wars universe. The article focuses on three aspects of the steampunk aesthetic as revealed by this evidentiary approach: technofantasy, a nostalgic interpretation of imagined history, and a willingness to break nineteenth century gender roles and allow women to act as steampunk heroes.

Keywords: *CGSociety* (Computer Graphics Society), digital art, gender roles, George Lucas, Orientalism, *Star Wars*, steampunk, technofantasy, visual aesthetic

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It has been over twenty years since K.W. Jeter inadvertently coined the term 'steampunk' in a letter to *Locus* magazine in 1987. Jeter jokingly qualified the neo-Victorian writings he, James P. Blaylock, and Tim Powers were producing with the '-punk' appendix, playing off the 1980s popularity of cyberpunk. Ironically the term stuck, both as descriptor for nearly every neo-Victorian work of speculative fiction since Jeter's *Infernal Devices* (1987), while retroactively subsuming works such as Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968), Michael Moorcock's *The Warlord of the Air* (1971), the 1960s television series *Wild, Wild West* (1965-1969, created by Michael Garrison), and even the writings of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, to the extent that *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (EF) lamented how "every fantasy which deals with the Gaslight Period is labelled steampunk" (Kaveney and Clute 1997: 390). Numerous debates in online forums seek to arrive at a cogent definition of steampunk, with suggestions ranging from narrowly restricting and exclusionary definitions to uselessly inclusive *in*definitions.[1] Despite such attempts at authoritative definitions, a fixed definition remains ephemeral, suggestive of a *futur à vapeur*.

The difficulty in defining steampunk stems from the evolution of the term as a literary sub-genre of science fiction to a sub-culture of Goth

fashion, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) arts and crafts movements, and more recently, ideological counter-culture. In an interview at *Steam Powered*, the 2008 California steampunk convention, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, editors of the *Steampunk* anthology (2008) discussed how the subculture emerged from visual steampunk elements found in films and graphic novels, themselves inspired by steampunk literature (A. VanderMeer and J. VanderMeer 2008a). Nonetheless, in an online forum thread, Jeff further explained that "the key to understanding the subculture is to realize it did not come to steampunk through the literature. Instead it arose largely independent of it and is closely allied with the DIY culture" (J. VanderMeer 2008: n.p.). Accordingly, defining steampunk unilaterally is challenged by what aspect of steampunk culture one is trying to define: the literature, the fashion, the *bricolage* artworks, or the politics?

I suggest that rather than defining any of these single expressions, it is more useful to consider steampunk as an array of visual markers which, when combined, constitute the look popularly understood as steampunk. Steampunk is not an attempt to recreate the past or even to perform counterfactual thought experiments, as Steffen Hantke proposed (Hantke 1999: 246). Alternate history is a facet of the applied aesthetic of steampunk, not its defining quality. Furthermore, as Jeff VanderMeer suggests, since the visual subculture of steampunk continues to define what steampunk is taken to be, it is possible to arrive at the constitution of the steampunk aesthetic by studying the products of that same subculture (J. VanderMeer 2008: n.p.).

Thankfully, the steampunk aesthetic has been applied to numerous items, from laptops to lingerie, and, interestingly, to the lightsaber of George Lucas's *Star Wars* universe, allowing for numerous potential case studies. Contrasting the differences between a 'steampunked' item and its original form should uncover elements of the steampunk aesthetic. The steampunk *Star Wars* models and images provide this contrast, with the advantage of highly recognisable characters and vehicles to juxtapose against their steampunk counterparts. As this case study also limits the scope of inquiry, it cannot represent a comprehensive determination of the steampunk aesthetic but rather proposes a useful starting point and theoretical approach for further study. By comparing these steampunk versions of culturally iconic characters, insightful features of the steampunk aesthetic may be derived: technofantasy, a nostalgic rather than realistic

view of history, and an egalitarian treatment of women as steampunk heroes.

The online phenomenon of steampunk Star Wars images and models – which I will collectively call 'Steam Wars' – was started by the digital artist Eric Poulton, who had been inspired by a Steampunk Lightsaber featured in *Wired* magazine online (Beschizza 2007).[2] Poulton's first image, of a Steampunk Darth Vader (see Figure 1), appeared at Poulton's blog on February 5, 2007. By the time *Ain't It Cool News*, a popular fan news site, featured Poulton's re-imagined images on March 23 of the same year, the artist had completed three more images (McWeeny 2007). The following day, the high-profile attention on Poulton's images prompted Roberto Ortiz of the *CGSociety*, a 'Society of Digital Artists', to challenge forum members to create concept art for a hypothetical 'Star Wars: Steampunk' game (Ortiz 2007). The thread was so popular that submissions continued long past the contest deadline, with a second challenge being issued in 2009.

Figure 1: 'Lord Vader', Eric Poulton.

In addition to Poulton, this paper will restrict analysis to the works of six artists from around the globe: Marcel E. Mercado, Daniel Helzer, and Sillof (United States); Miljenko Simic (Croatia); Björn Hurri (United Kingdom); and Alister Lockhart (Australia). With the exception of Sillof, all of these artists work in a two-dimensional digital medium. While Steam Wars has been re-visioned in 3-dimensional digital art as well as physical models (an entire challenge limited the media for such models to LEGO blocks, of which one will be examined), only Sillof's modelling work will be examined, given that he is the only artist to modify the entire cast of major characters in all three of the original Star Wars films "in an antiquated Victorian style" (Sillof 2006-2007a).

1. Steam Wars' Tech: Neo-Victorian Anachronistic Technofantasy

The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites technology as a defining feature of steampunk, describing the genre as "science fiction which has a historical setting (esp. based on industrialized, nineteenth-century society) and characteristically features steam-powered, mechanized machinery rather than electronic technology" (OED). Given how steampunk "focuses on technology as the crucial factor in its understanding and portrayal of Victorianism" (Hantke 1999: 247), it is unsurprising to find numerous Steam Wars images concerned with the "technological anachronism" of steampunk (Kaveney and Clute 1997: 391). Accordingly, *Star Wars* seems to be uniquely suited to a steampunk aesthetic: as one blogger, 'D', has commented, "Star Wars is already about anachronistic technology", citing the presence of the lightsaber battles as swordfights, space battles as dogfights and Chewbacca's bowcaster's resemblance to a crossbow (D 2007a).

Technology is central to the aesthetic of both space opera and steampunk. Yet unlike other science fiction, the technologies of space opera and steampunk are matters of aesthetic form, not scientific function. In steampunk, technology is laid bare, brass clock gears exposed for the viewer to see. Robert Smith, lead singer of the steampunk band Abney Park, commented on this externalised technology in steampunk: "When the iPod, a white plastic box with one button, is winning awards for beauty, mankind has lost its sense of what beauty is" (qtd. in Von Busack 2008). Phil Foglio, creator of the webcomic *Girl Genius*, credits this "magic box" approach to modern technology as the impetus behind the turn to steampunk, stating that

people are feeling the nostalgic loss of a time when understanding "how things worked" was simpler (Foglio 2008).

Yet the goal of understanding "how things work" is illusory: even though steampunk reveals a machine's inner workings, those workings seem to rely as much on the rules of alchemy than real-world physical sciences. As remedy to the delimited definition of steampunk, *The Encylopedia of Fantasy* suggests a definition that considers "what are in effect historical *technofantasies*" (Kaveney and Clute 1997: 391, emphasis added). Many steampunk gadgets and vehicles require some form of magical impulsion or cohesion to be rendered plausible. This merging of magic and technology permits the designs of DaVinci not only to be constructed, but also to work; it permits safe airship travel at impossible speeds, using theoretical fuel sources such as aether or phlogiston; it permits clockwork automatons with emotions in a world where positronic explanations are unnecessary.

Figure 2: 'C-3PO', Sillof

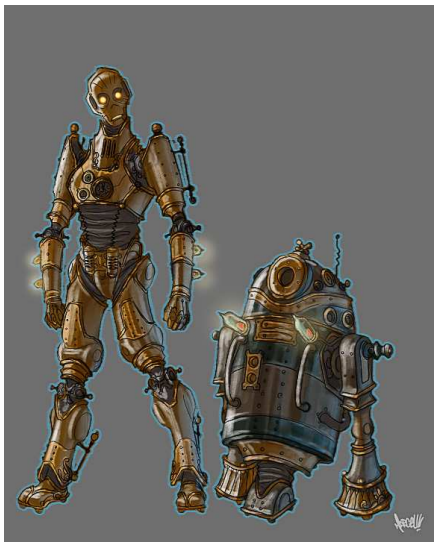

Figure 3: 'Droids', Marcel E. Mercado

The protocol droid C-3P0, rendered in the steampunk aesthetic, demonstrates this tendency to externalise but not explain, to grant emotions to a machine whose decision making processes are effectively the same as those of a calculator. Sillof's version of C-3P0 employs "exposed gears,

pulleys, and hinges" with "a burnished antique gold finish, rather then the classic polished finish" (Sillof 2006-2007a). Marcel Mercado's analogous image of C3P0 and his companion R2D2 was inspired by a clock maker's website that "uses a lot of gears and old moving pieces to decorate mantle clocks" (2007b). In both cases, a steampunk modification of the droids involved revealing the technology within. While the clockwork elements indicate how the droids could be made to move, the "antique" craftsmanship cannot account for artificial intelligence, unlike the wires of Lucas's C3P0, which act as indicators of modern computers, providing audiences with a short-hand explanation for how the droid can speak and think.

Figure 4: 'Luke Skywalker'

Figure 5: 'Obi-Wan Kenobi'

Figure 6: 'Darth Vader'

All images by Sillof, **© 2006-2007 Sillof**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Steam Wars images of lightsabers (see Figures 4-6) provide elaboration of this idea. Although subsequent works such as *Star Wars: The Visual Dictionary* have revealed the power source of the Jedi's traditional weapon, the original three films lacked exposition on the lightsaber's inner workings. Likewise, Poulton's *Lord Vader* (Figure 1) carries a lightsaber without apparent impulsion; explanation is provided by corresponding text exposing the whimsy of the weapon. Poulton substitutes the term lightsaber

for "the Phlogisticated Aether Torch, more commonly referred to as the phlogisabre" (Poulton 2007d). The OED defines Phlogiston as "[a] hypothetical substance formerly supposed to exist in combination in all combustible bodies, and to be released in the process of combustion". Like Aether, Phlogiston often appears as a power-source in steampunk works and culture, despite lacking any real-world scientific value; for instance, it is cited as the power source of some of Greg Broadmore's retro-rayguns in *Doctor Grordbort's Contrapulatronic Dingus Directory* (2008).

Sillof's *Luke Skywalker, Obi Wan Kenobi*, and *Darth Vader* (see Figures 4-6) all feature tubes connecting their lightsabers to a power pack worn like an over-the-shoulder satchel, a design idea repeated in Daniel Helzer's image of Luke facing Vader in Cloud City. The tubes are a visual explanation for how the lightsaber is powered, but are inconvenient from the perspective of combat, threatening to entangle the wielder. The lightsaber held by Alister Lockhart's *Steam Darthe* removes the elegant grace of Lucas's lightsaber, which seemed to be nearly weightless. Lockhart's lightsaber resembles a superheated bar of iron, a ponderous threat of both heat and impact.

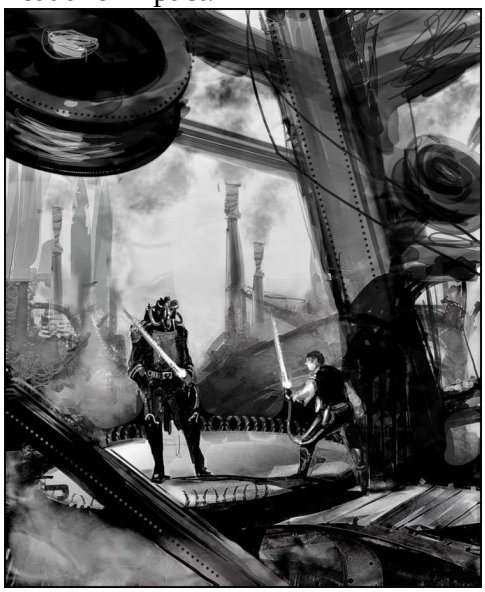

Figure 7: 'Sketch 354', Daniel Helzer. **© 2007 Daniel Helzer**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Figure 8: 'Steam Darthe', Alister Lockhart. **© 2007 Alister Lockhart**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

This clunky approach to technology is common to the steampunk aesthetic and poses an interesting challenge to Steam Wars' artists. Given the films' penchant for high-speed space battles, how does one 'steampunk' ships that run at light-speed? Compare Lucas's blockade runner in *New Hope* (1977) with Daniel Helzer's Steam Wars version: Helzer's *Blockaid Runner* (Figure 9) looks nothing like its namesake, instead resembling a flying barge with a paddle-wheel affixed to the side. Similarly, Miljenko Simic's *Tie Fighter* (Figure 10) could have been titled 'Tri-fighter', since it shares antiquated design elements with fixed-wing tri-planes of the early twentieth century.

Figure 9: 'Blockaid Runner', Daniel Helzer. **© 2007 Daniel Helzer**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

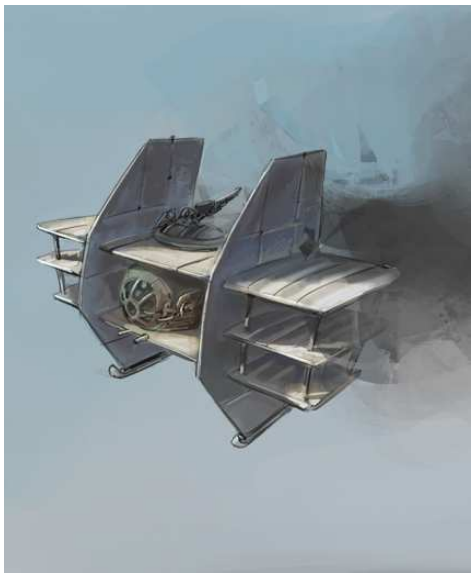

Figure 10: 'Tie Fighter', Miljenko Simic. **© 2007 Miljenko Simic**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Likewise, the X-wing as rendered by Simic in *Steam Star* (see Figure 11) would be a much slower machine than its cinematic counterpart, propelled as it is by four rear-mounted airscrews with bi-plane-style X-foils. None of these designs have real-world potential for flight; they simply 'look cool'.

Figure 11: 'Steam Star', Miljenko Simic.

While these designs strain real-world physics, Chris Doyle's 'Falcon of the Millennium' (Figure 12) abandons it completely:

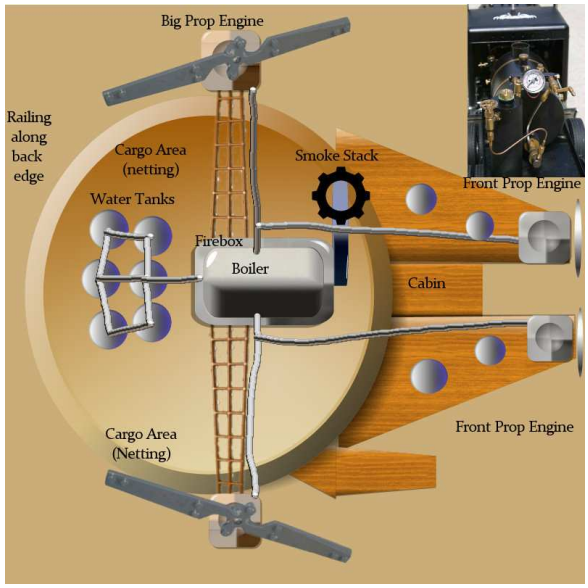

Figure 12: 'Falcon of the Millennium', Christopher Doyle.

Several online discussions about the steampunking of the *Millennium Falcon* debated the best Victorian iteration of the ship whose superior speed was established by the distinction of having "made the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs" (Lucas 1977). How can one apply a clumsy design aesthetic to a ship which is supposed to be one of the fastest in the galaxy? The difficulty of creating a satisfactorily rapid transportation in steampunk style has left the *Millennium Falcon* largely untried in steampunk Star Wars images. The schematic diagram and documentation justifying the design choices and construction of Chris Doyle's LEGO model of the 'Falcon of the Millennium', posits the spaceship as tramp-trader, complete with open air wooden decks, lateral and horizontal propeller engines, and rope netting for cargo, all reminiscent of a famous rapid mode of steampunk transportation, the *Albatross* from Jules Verne's *Robur the Conqueror* (1886), a design that, if not impossible, would at the least be impractical.[3]

In instances when steampunk technology could, or – from a historical perspective – did work, history is often ignored in favour of high-adventure, as demonstrated by the steampunk airship. Next to brass goggles, the airship is quite possibly the image most evocative of the steampunk aesthetic. Without exception, Lucas's Imperial Star Destroyers are rendered as airships in steampunk Star Wars. Alister Lockhart's *Steampunk Destroyer* (see Figure 13) exemplifies the "contradictory mix of fascination and repulsion the airship evoked" (De Syon qtd. in Freedman 2004: 47), illustrating a duo of monstrous airships in a sepia toned sky, "an uncanny mix of machine and natural entity, bridging the sublime and the grotesque, the awe-inspiring and the monstrous" (Freedman 2004: 51). Black smoke, ostensibly from coal fires, belches forth from the rear of two zeppelins, seemingly modelled upon the *Graf Zeppelin* of the 'golden age' of airship travel in the 1920s and 1930s, made possible by the nineteenth-century experimentation with balloon and airship travel by pioneers such as Henri Giffard and Alberto Santos-Dumont.

Figure 13: 'Steampunk Destroyer', Alister Lockhart.

While the 'golden age' of airship travel did not occur until the start of the twentieth century, these lighter-than-air ships have an iconic value within the steampunk visual aesthetic. At *Steam Powered*, one could purchase an official looking 'airship license' and t-shirts from 'airship institutes' in Germany, France and the United States, while members of the steampunk band Abney Park claim to be airship pirates aboard a lighter-than-air craft named *Ofelia*. The airship as sublime cultural object is explored at length in Ariela Freedman's essay 'Zeppelin Fictions and the British Home Front', in which she demonstrates how both dread and awe combined in the British imagination so that "the smooth skin of the Zeppelin became a screen for the projection of fantasies of apocalypse and redemption" (Freedman 2004: 48). Like the nuclear bomb at the height of the Cold War, the airship was an unrealised threat, more effective as imagined terror than actualised weapon. The relative uselessness of the airship in combat was one of the factors leading to the end of the use of

zeppelins in the twentieth century, again underscoring the historical reality that the "Zeppelin's impact was more imaginative than actual" (Freedman 2004: 48). The airship reveals steampunk's ambivalent relationship toward real-world history, whereby "the shaping force behind steampunk is not history but the will of its author to establish and then violate and modify a set of ontological ground rules" (Hantke 1999: 248).

This ambivalence is further underscored by only a single appearance of a steam-train in the Steam Wars images, despite Hantke's conviction that the name "steampunk" esteems the "steam engine as the most appropriate icon of the past" when describing the genre's main focus on anachronistic Victorian technology (Hantke 1999: 247). Amidst the myriad steampunk airships and ground forces in Miljenko Simic's *Steam Star* (Figure 11), a rail-vehicle follows a track down a snow-covered slope. Aside from this instance, the Steam Wars images overlook the reality of the steam locomotive and its railways as more than simply a technological achievement in the nineteenth century. In contrast, the Italian artist Marco Rolandi's 'Rail Haven' (Figure 14) might be described as a more 'historically' accurate steampunk revision of the starships of Lucas's fictional universe.[4]

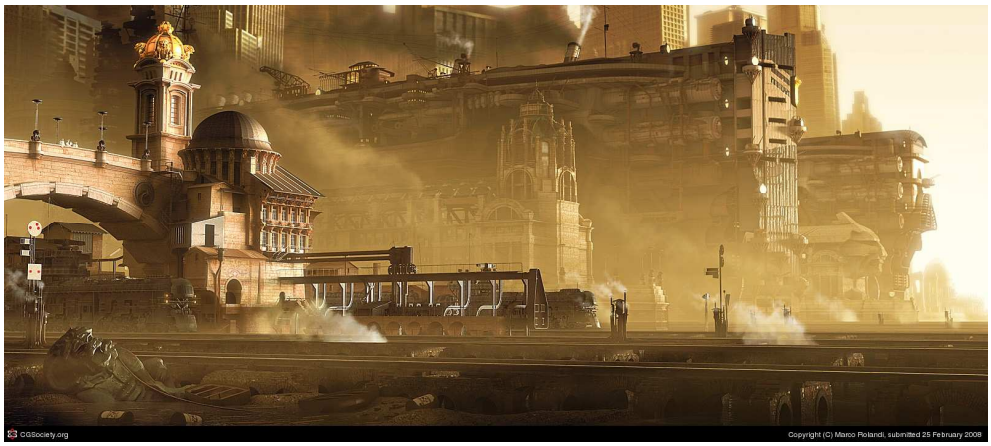

Figure 14: 'Rail Haven', Marco Rolandi.
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The steam train was "a symbol of the new world of machines and industry" (Keep 2004: 139). While many claimed that the steam train and the

telegraph had "annihilated space and time", in truth this claim had more to do with how the new technologies had "transformed the social sphere" than with how they functioned "as an accurate reflection of their material effects" (Keep 2004: 138). Like the airship, the steam train represented the power of technology as abstract symbol rather than concrete reality. This disregard for the realities of physics or history is taken a step further in Eric Poulton's *Massive Solar-Orbiting Electro-Mechanical Analytic Engine, Mark 6* (Figure 15), which imagines Lucas's Death Star as a moon-sized clockwork hybrid of antique globe and pulp-SF death ray.

Figure 15: 'Massive Solar-Orbiting Electro-Mechanical Analytic Engine, Mark 6', Eric Poulton. **© 2007 Eric Poulton**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Poulton's accompanying text states that the station is the product of research into "Arcane Mathematics, the mathematical study of the Force", as well as the use of the Force as an energy source (Poulton 2007a).

The magical Force as potential energy source might seem contrary to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy's* definition of steampunk as technofantasy. However, the *Encylopedia* also mentions "books which fit directly into the form developed by Tim Powers, K.W. Jeter and James P. Blaylock from models derived from Michael Moorcock, Christopher Priest and others" to clarify what is meant by 'technofantasy' (Kaveney and Clute 1997: 391).

The inclusion of Tim Powers is revealing. Powers' *Anubis Gates*, often cited as one of the original steampunk texts, contains no hard technology. There are no automatons, no ornithopters, and no airships, but there is a good deal of magic. Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995) is about two magicians competing for the greatest stage trick, and the appearance of Nikola Tesla does little to dispel the narrative's metaphysical elements, particularly the inclusion of a sub-plot involving spiritualism. Newer steampunk works utilise alchemy or occult ritual to develop steampunk technologies, as demonstrated in Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone* (2008), the story of a clockwork woman who becomes an alchemist. Her fanciful commissions include creating an elixir to extend the lives of gargoyles and a "fragrance that would cause regret" (Sedia 2008: 19). To this example we can add the god-like Victorian AI of Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990); the mysterious disease that transforms men into machines in S. M. Peters' *Whitechapel Gods* (2008); the magical manipulation of creation-made-clockwork in Jay Lake's *Mainspring* (2007); the divining alethiometer of Pullman's *The Golden Compass* (1995); or mathematics as the power to alter time and space in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006).

Paradoxically, steampunk technologies require some facet of 'magic' in order to be rendered plausible. Based upon these images, it seems that steampunk technology is exposed not to explain its underlying impetus but rather to communicate its purpose through visual hyperbole. While steampunk has long been considered a sub-genre of science fiction, its technology is far closer to magic than hard science. Generally, technology in hard science fiction obeys real-world physical laws; literary steampunk technology obeys fantasy-world physical laws. It constitutes a plot element concerned with moving the story forward, rather than explaining if the technology could move at all. Lavie Tidhar's steampunk summary includes an interesting thought on the interplay between magic and technology in steampunk:

> The underlying theme of all fiction within the Steampunk sphere resorts to that moment *whereby technology transcends understanding and becomes, for all intents and purposes, magical*. […T]he true strength of Steampunk is the way in which [magic and technology] coexist: where technology becomes magical, magic becomes rigorously scientific. The

> resulting tension is at the core of Steampunk. (Tidhar 2005, original emphasis)

Consider the way technology is used in Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan* (2009), wherein the opposing sides of World War I are demarcated into the 'Darwinist' nations of Britain, France, and, Russia, allied against the 'Clanker' nations of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. The Clankers utilise classic steampunk technology, like the Cyklop Stormwalker revealed at the book's opening: "a real engine of war" standing "taller than the stable's roof, its two metal feet sunk deep into the soil of the riding paddock" with a "cannon mounted in its belly, and the stubby noses of two Spandau machine guns [sprouting] from it head, which was as big as a smokehouse" (Westerfeld 2009: 8). Westerfeld's use of real historical devices, such as the Spandau machine guns and the engines of the Stormwalker, developed by the Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft (who later developed the Mercedes-Benz), gives the novel a strong sense of verisimilitude.

This verisimilitude is discarded when the Darwinist nations' technology is revealed. While the Clanker devices are only somewhat fantastic, the fabricated beasts of the Darwinists undeniably render the novel a technofantasy. Nevertheless, the reader can accept the conceit, since Westerfeld makes a slow reveal of the Darwinists' genetically altered animals through the adventures of a teenage girl masquerading as a boy to enlist in the British Air Service: first, "lupine tigeresques", massive crossbreeds of tiger and wolf which are powerful enough to pull an "all-terrain carriage" (Westerfeld 2009: 28); then, the Huxley ascender, a hydrogen breathing organism that serves the same purpose as a hot-air-balloon, "made from the life chains of medusae – jellyfish and other venomous sea creatures" (Westerfeld 2009: 32); before finally revealing the *Leviathan* itself:

> The thing was gigantic – larger than St. Paul's Cathedral […]. The shining cylinder was shaped like a zeppelin, but the flanks pulsed with the motion of its cilia, and the air around it swarmed with symbiotic bats and birds [...].
>
> The *Leviathan* had been the first of the great hydrogen breathers fabricated to rival the kaiser's zeppelins.

> [...] The *Leviathan*'s body was made from the life-threads of a whale, but a hundred other species were tangled into its design, countless creatures fitting together like the gears of a stopwatch. Flocks of fabricated birds swarmed around it […]. The *Leviathan* wasn't one beastie, but a vast web of life in ever shifting balance. (Westerfeld 2009: 69-71)

Aside from being a wonderful device of organic technofantasy and a brilliant contrast to the machines of the Clanker nations, the Leviathan also serves as an allusion to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), at least insofar as Hobbes' text speaks to the idea of the commonwealth. Through the analogy of a hydrogen-breathing airship, which is both living organism and ecosystem, Westerfeld's text suggests that the commonwealth is comes into existence, as Hobbes writes, when people restrain themselves from the action of war out of the foresight of their own preservation. One might even say that this new *Leviathan* is a postmodern riff on the former. The airship is not a speculation upon actual genetic science, as it would be in hard science fiction; it is a visual representation of social contract theory or perhaps even environmental concerns, wherein the lives of everyone and everything on board are interconnected. Despite such high-minded interpretations, it remains true that the airship *The Leviathan* is also a giant floating whale, an excellent example of how steampunk technology is often more about enchantment than engineering.

2. Steam Wars' Rebellion: The Empire is West, not East

The juxtaposition of science and magic are echoed in the steampunk aesthetic's treatment of history and nostalgia. The OED's requisite of a nineteenth-century historical setting for steampunk has been disregarded by newer adherents to steampunk as culture, as evinced by Steamcon coordinator Diana Vick's bold assertion that "Steampunk needs historical accuracy like a dirigible needs a goldfish" (Vick 2009). Steampunk is less concerned with recreating the past than *an idea of the past*, a nostalgic romanticism of what the Victorian era represents, rather than how it actually *was*. Like steampunk, Star Wars is invested with a nostalgia that "does not portray a real past but rather evokes a sense of cultural past" (Wetmore 2005: 7). It is this sense of cultural past in steampunk that Steffen Hantke refers to when he claims that "Victorianism, what little there is of it in the

conventional sense, appears not as a historical given but as a textual construct open to manipulation and modification" (Hantke 1999: 248).

In an interview, Jeff VanderMeer criticised this tendency towards romantic nostalgia in steampunk, stating that the only way for a nascent literary movement to presently emerge from steampunk would require the creation of narratives which "write against" the grain of the optimistic adventure story, concerned with the harsh realities of the Victorian era, not just a romanticised version thereof (VanderMeer 2008a). Inasmuch as steampunk plays with counterfactual histories, it also purports to "[take] the visual qualities of the Steam Age and [reapply] them to modern political and social sensibilities", allegedly with the result that, although "steampunk enthusiasts like the grandeur of the British Empire", they are not necessarily "willing to accept the racism and colonialism upon which it was built" (G.D. Falksen qtd. in Poeter 2008). While this may accurately describe the stated intention of steampunk, the actual expression can often prove quite different, as seen by Nic Ottens's editorial in *The Gatehouse Gazette*:

> Unlike our present day of interconnectedness, globalization and what-not, up until the nineteenth century, the Orient was very much a place of mystery, inhabited by people alien to Europeans' experience, an exotic, cruel, and barbaric refuge for Western imagination. Critics of Orientalism have done much to cast shame upon our often patronizing and bizarre representations of Eastern life and tradition, but fortunately for those incorrigible aficionados of Oriental romance, *steampunk allows us to reject the chains of reality and all the racism and guilt associated with it*, to explore anew this imagined world of sultans and saberrattling [sic] Islamic conquerors; harems and white slavery; samurai, dragons and dark, bustling bazaars frequented by the strangest sort of folk. Isn't this, after all, steampunk's very premise? To delve into a past that never really was. (Ottens 2010: 3, emphasis added)

Sadly, the Steam Wars images occasionally reflect Ottens's view. To properly reflect the anti-racist claims of steampunk, Steam Wars images could explicitly offer versions of Lucas's characters and universe that would

write (or draw) against the grain of the *Star Wars* films' "construction of the Rebellion as predominantly white"; instead, the Steam Wars images tend to create a world "in which Asians are evil and no humans of color are presented as either worthwhile role models or active role models for viewers" (Wetmore 2005: 6).

Figure 16: 'Jabba the Hutt', Eric Poulton.

The obvious target for assessing how well Steam Wars deals with the issues of race and ethnicity is Eric Poulton's *Jabba the Hutt* (Figure 16), which renders the galactic crime-boss in a bricolage of Orientalist imagery, a mix of yellow peril and middle-eastern exoticism. The image spurred a lively debate as to whether the use of racial stereotypes in recursive fantasies such as steampunk was acceptable or not. Is reiteration of the racial stereotyping found in original works of pulp or Victorian fiction permissible as homage to those genres? The consensus of forum participants deemed it anachronistic to ignore the stereotypes, but warned current artists and writers of their responsibility to provide subversive, counter-cultural approaches to issues of race in such works. Poulton admitted his steampunk

Jabba was based on Ming the Merciless from the comic strip *Flash Gordon* (1934-2003), a character in turn based upon Fu Manchu, both representative of the early twentieth-century fear of Asian influence as agent of moral corruption in North America (Poulton 2007e). In fairness, Poulton conceded that although his "intentions weren't racist […] intentions are largely irrelevant when it comes to illustration" (Poulton 2007e).

Figure 17: Detail, from 'The Mos Eisley Taverne: Rolicking Good Times', Marcel E. Mercado. **© 2007 Marcel E. Mercado**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Even alien heroes become subject to Star Wars' white ethnocentrism in Steam Wars. In 'The Mos Eisley Taverne: Rolicking Good Times', Mercado represents Chewbacca as a human, based upon the idea that Han is "essentially a pirate" and Chewbacca, or Chewie, is akin to a "black non-slave first mate", an idea with precedence in the nineteenth-century history of piracy: "In order to keep Chewie looking almost alien he needed to stick out as a foreigner in London at the end of the century, thus I gave him an almost primitive look to counter the Victorian style" (Mercado 2007e). Correspondingly, Pringle states that in space opera, "[a]liens can be fellow crew-members and buddies (rather like Ishmael's fearsomely tattooed friend Queequeg in *Moby Dick*)" (Pringle 2000: 39-40). Mercado's Chewbacca is evocative of Queequeg with his tribal tattoos and dreadlocks, no longer a furry alien, but instead wearing furs: dressed in animal skins, he wears the

stereotypical clothing of 'savages', making him a 'Man Friday' to Han Solo's Crusoe.

In all Steam Wars images, the Rebellion is a peculiarly Westernised one. Marcel E. Mercado's *Red 5 Luke* (Figure 18) depicts a recruitment poster with a stars-and-stripes backdrop reminiscent of American propaganda posters during World War II.

Figure 18: 'Red 5 Luke', Marcel E. Mercado.

Building off of Delacroix's *La liberté guidant le people* (1830), Mercado's *Leia Leading* (Figure 19) contains the obvious addition of stars to the red, white, and blue flag Leia carries in emulation of Lady Liberty. This construction of a WASP Rebellion is further established by the images of Imperial figures and ships, often cast as Prussian Eastern Europeans.

Figure 19: 'Leia Leading', Marcel E. Mercado.

In addition to papal robes, Mercado's *Palpatine* (Figure 20) has an *Eisernes Kreuz* hung from a chain around his neck, and nearly every Steam Wars image of Vader exchanges the iconic samurai-styled helmet with a version based on Prussian design, sometimes, augmented by Prussian military garb (see Figures 1, 6, 7, and 8).

Figure 20: 'By the Grace of the Sith: Emperor Palpatine', Marcel E. Mercado.

In Sillof's line, Vader and all imperial soldiers wear gas masks, an innovation first used in war by the Germans in WWI. Yet imagining the Prussian East as the evil Empire and the American or British West as heroic Rebellion or Resistance to tyranny hardly represents the historical realities of the Victorian period.

To illustrate what could constitute a more subversive or liberating treatment of the historical realities of the Victorian period in the Steam Wars universe, I will engage in a brief exercise in recursive fantasy based upon Marcel E. Mercado's version of Ben Kenobi (Figure 21).

Figure 21: 'Poor Old Man Ben', Marcel E. Mercado.

Here the venerable Jedi Knight is imagined as a pastiche of Alec Guinness, the historical Richard Burton, and the fictional Allan Quatermain of Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999). The once-great Jedi is pictured, "Hooked to the hookah pipe again", beside text which asks the questions, "What will happen once our intrepid heroes decide to fight? Will he be too passive to help join their plight?" These queries are is followed by an invitation to "Join us for a rousing tale of Wonder and Discovery" (Mercado 2007f).

This pulp-style advertisement is much like the ones found throughout Moore and O'Neill's graphic novel, establishing a link of homage or inspiration. The Allan Quatermain of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is an opium addict, and Mercado states that he had originally intended his Obi-Wan to be smoking opium, but chose the hookah for "design purposes" (Mercado 2007f). If Moore and O'Neill's Quatermain is conflated with Mercado's steampunk Kenobi, then it should be concluded that Kenobi, as evidenced by the combination of English tweed with Indian turban, has broken ties with the Empire he once served, which in Mercado's image is likely the Star Wars equivalent of Britain. Further, to incorporate the intention of Lucas's idea of the Empire as "[a] very powerful and technological superpower trying to take over a little country of peasants", the Empire must be Britain. While the German empire better fits the design aesthetic of Lucas's Empire, the British Empire has the distinction of having been, at its height, the largest in human history (George Lucas qtd. in Wetmore 2005: 2).

Revolt and resistance occurred throughout the British Empire's history, but the Indian Revolt of 1857 was particularly devastating to the British conceptualisation of the colonial Empire as indestructible (Chakravarty 2005: 4). Given the hookah and the turban, it can be conjectured that the planet Tatooine, where Lucas's Kenobi went in self-exile, is Indian in the Steam Wars secondary universe. One might even conclude that all outer-rim planets constitute the Orientalised East of Victorian England in Steam Wars, since Hurri's *Master Yoda* (Figure 22) is also seen smoking a hookah:[5]

Figure 22: 'Master Yoda', Björn Hurri.

Accordingly, the denizens of Tatooine should reflect this aesthetic choice. Ergo, a steampunk Luke and Leia should be presented as Indian. In Leia's case especially, this choice would have an historical precedent: Lakshmibai, the Rhani of Jhansi, was one of the principal leaders in the Sepoy revolt of 1857.

This digression into recursive fantasy is ultimately relevant to the issues of race and ethnicity that a nineteenth-century aesthetic raises. The blogs *Beyond Victoriana* by Ay-leen the Peacemaker and *Silver Goggles* by Jaymee 'Jha' Goh regularly investigate the racial ramifications of writing that is either set in, or evokes the colonial period: these investigations have challenged ethnically irresponsible renderings of steampunk worlds. Steampunk has the opportunity to rewrite the past, but such a rewriting should not be done in a fashion that either ignores or romanticizes history's dishonourable moments. Conscious of such revisions, Hantke states that "[s]teampunk stages itself as a challenge, a provocation to all forms of organicist thought, no matter whether they appear under the guise of the

well-made novel or the responsible historicist recreation of the past" (Hantke 1999: 250). In the case of *Star Wars*, the artists' steampunk re-imaginings challenge 30 years of the film's imagistic purity. Steampunk is the definitive aesthetic for the textual poacher, lacking canonical or iconic figures, dictating creative expressions such as fan-convention costumes, fan-fiction, or Steam Wars' re-imagined images and models.

Steam Wars issues a challenge in the very act of re-imagining Lucas's canonical creations. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Paticipatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins describes the struggle between Star Wars fans and Lucasfilm Ltd. for control over representations of Star Wars characters going back to the early 1980s (see Jenkins 1992: 30-32). What can only be described as orthodox responses by fans towards Steam Wars art demonstrates the hegemony of Lucas's canonical character representation; comments on blogs decry these re-imagined iterations as demeaning the purity of the original conceptualisations of Han Solo, Darth Vader, etc. So the very act of defamiliarising these familiar characters embodies the steampunk aesthetic of resistance of Empire. Bryan D. Palmer describes the difficulty of seeing through the "all-encompassing circle" of imperial power "to other possibilities," positioning the "socially constructed character" of the pirate as indicative of "remarkably resilient and resourceful 'nations' of marginality", thus representing "experiences of those who refused empire's many incarcerations" (Palmer 2000: 183). However, while these 'pirate' artists' drawings, paintings, and figures resist the 'Empire' of Lucasfilm, the images they create retain the source material's latent racism, continuing to adhere more to nostalgia than historical representation. If steampunk is supposed to mirror the nineteenth century, then the rebellion against Empire should be decidedly multi-ethnic, mirroring the racial makeup of the Matrix films' (1999-2003) resistance. That such resistance *can* be enacted in steampunk is demonstrated by Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001), where the protagonist describes the racial multiplicity of the forces of the "statics", those who wage war against the motorised cities that ravage the Earth:

> everywhere he looked he saw soldiers and airmen of the league: blond giants from Spitzbergen and blue-black warriors from the Mountains of the Moon; the small dark people of the Andean statics and people the color of firelight

> from jungle strongholds in Laos and Annam. (Reeve 2003: 275-276).

Future Steam Wars images might try framing the Empire in the visual style of the West rather than the East, as Michael Moorcock did in the trilogy *A Nomad of the Time Streams: A Scientific Romance* (1995). Moorcock's seminal *Warlord of the Air* (1971), the first volume of the trilogy, treated this subject with a racial sensitivity uncharacteristic of the 1970s. While this first novel's protagonist, Captain Oswald Bastable, begins as a loyal servant of the British Empire, he eventually becomes its opponent. Once he learns that "[t]he Indian starves so that the Briton may feast", he becomes sympathetic toward the Dawn City rebels in their "international settlement" containing "exiles from every oppressed country in the world" (Moorcock 1995: 94, 105). The Warlord of the Air, the leader of Dawn City, is Chinese: a bold move, given the novel's release during the Vietnam War. Shuo Ho Ti, also known as General O.T. Shaw, is as sympathetic in his acts of terrorism as Verne's Captain Nemo, though his enemies are the colonial powers of France, America, and Britain. Unlike many Asian characters, O.T. Shaw is not the companion of a Lawrence of Arabia leading the way to freedom: he himself *is* that leader.

Since Moorcock, steampunk has either avoided Asian characters altogether or rendered them the hero's sidekick, like the stereotyped Arab and Indian companions of Captain Athelstane King in S.M. Stirling's *The Peshawar Lancers* (2002). Among the scant exceptions to this tendency, Philip Reeve's Miss Anna Fang in *Mortal Engines* comes closer to what I suggest here. Instead of being presented as an 'oriental' from the outset, Fang is simply described as a woman in a red coat. It is only after she removes her sunglasses that Reeve describes her "dark and almond shaped eyes" (Reeve 2003: 88). Anna Fang, a.k.a. Feng Hua, the Wind Flower, is a legendary aviatrix, a dangerous sword fighter, and the engineer of her airship the *Jenny Haniver*, which she constructed to escape slavery: a female Han Solo in an airship. Yet Anna Fang is not only an exemplar of how steampunk should write against its own inherent ethnocentrism, but also of how steampunk laudably posits empowered female characters.

3. Girls with Goggles, Damsel without Distress

The brass goggles of steampunk fashion are so pervasive an aspect of the steampunk aesthetic, that while I was pondering how to create a steampunk costume to attend *Steam Powered*, friends commented I could wear *anything*, so long as I included goggles. *Brass Goggles*, one of the foremost steampunk blogs, purports to be "[a] blog and forum devoted to the lighter side of all things Steampunk" (*Brass Goggles* 2008). Yet it conflates this purpose with a concrete denotation of brass goggles as "a practical, sturdy, example of protective eyewear," suggesting that the brass goggles serve as a symbolic marker for the alternate way steampunk views or (re-)imagines history (*Brass Goggles* 2008). The goggles speak to the aesthetic of literal high-adventure and steampunk heroes' and heroines' involvement in derring-do at high altitudes, which will require sturdy eye-protection. The brass, ornate frames of the steampunk goggles indicate a desire for the ornate and opulent in steampunk aesthetics. Goggles are a symbol of steampunk's romanticism, a lens to focalise the alternative visions of steampunk heroism. In Steam Wars, the good guys and gals wear goggles.

These nigh ubiquitous "classic steampunk goggles" appear in a number of Steam Wars images, figuring most prominently in Sillof's action figures and Björn Hurri's Steam Wars images (Sillof 2006-2007a). Sillof makes mention of the goggles as being a "staple" of his Steam Wars line, including them in the design of both heroes and villains (Sillof 2006-2007c). The Steam Wars heroes (Luke, Han, Leia and Chewbacca) are all rendered at least once wearing round aviator's goggles; Han and Chewbacca sport goggles in both Sillof and Hurri's versions; goggles are worn by Mercado's *Red Five Luke* (Figure 18) and Sillof's 'Luke Skywalker' from *New Hope*, but are conspicuously absent from the latter's 'Jedi Luke Skywalker'.

Luke is the only Rebel pilot competent enough to negotiate the trenches of the Death Star and bring victory. Han Solo and his first mate Chewbacca are pilot and co-pilot of the *Millennium Falcon*, one of the fastest ships in the galaxy. Accordingly, their Steam Wars iterations wear aviator's goggles. By the third film, Luke has exchanged his naive and optimistic goal of becoming a pilot for the Rebellion for the stoic discipline of a Jedi Knight. The Steam Wars *Jedi Luke Skywalker* has discarded his brass goggles, symbolising the lofty idealism for the steampunk-within-steampunk technological anachronism of Jedi armour and weapon.[6] Clearly,

one cannot take life too seriously with brass goggles on. Most notably though, while the Star Wars trilogy posited a trio of heroes – Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia – it was initially only the male characters who sported the goggles in the majority of Steam Wars images.

In the introduction to *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage*, Sue Short makes the following incisive statement about contemporary media: "while the male journey from adolescence to adulthood is relatively commonplace, the female passage towards maturity has been virtually ignored" (Short 2006: 4). As an example, Short cites George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga, pointing out that while Luke Skywalker grows from "simple farmhand […] to a man equipped […] to battle the forces of evil and earn his place as a true hero", his twin sister Princess Leia "has no equivalent claim to Luke's destiny" despite their shared parentage (Short 2006: 4-5). As Short notes, Leia "shows no propensity towards using the Force and even seems to diminish in her assertiveness as the trilogy develops" (Short 2006: 5).

Lucas stated in interviews that Leia was intended to be a different sort of fairy tale princess, not simply a damsel in distress. Yet aside from being a crack shot with both blaster and her tongue, Leia is continually relegated to requiring rescue. This is reversed when she attempts to rescue Han, but the success of the rescue ultimately rests in Luke's capable, fully-trained, Jedi hands. Leia goes from successful infiltrator of Jabba's palace to metal bikini clad slave girl, before Luke shows up to rescue her. One wonders how the *Star Wars* saga might have differed, had Leia been given an equivalent link to the Force. What if, during the opening moments of *The Empire Strikes Back* (rather than at the end of the film), Leia sensed Luke's call from the frozen wastes of Hoth? Her sudden awareness of Luke's location on the outside of Cloud City would then be a further clue to her Force sensitivity. Imagine the speeder bike chase scene if both Leia and Luke had been wielding lightsabers against the Imperial troops, or the final moments between Vader and Luke being completed by Leia's presence. As the films stand, there is really no narrative point to Luke and Leia being twins (the books carry this legacy on, but these texts remain largely apocryphal for marginal fans of the series). *Return of the Jedi* could have carried more weight in its title alone if Leia was Jedi as well, with the damsel in distress trope completely inverted when she successfully rescues Han in the opening moments, and thereafter Luke at a crucial point in his

struggle with Vader, reversing the roles these two heroes played to her heroine in *New Hope*.

Figure 23: 'Princess Leia'; **Figure 24:** 'Slave Leia' All images by Sillof. **© 2006-2007 Sillof**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Figure 25: 'Slave Princess Leia', Daniel Helzer. **© 2007 Daniel Helzer**, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

The Steam Wars Leia both reiterates and revises Lucas's Princess. Sillof's first revision (Figure 23) is simply a pre-Victorian Leia; despite intentions to remake her as a "1700's [sic] revolutionary woman" based upon "the famous Romanticism paintings of Lady Liberty leading the French in battle", with "the obvious corset" added just to ensure it was consistent with the "steampunk style" of the other figures; the presence of the gun in her hand is the only indication that she is a revolutionary (Sillof 2006-2007a). The artist's 'Slave Princess Leia' (Figure 24) transforms the heroine from damsel- to dominatrix-in-distress, but in-distress nonetheless. Daniel Helzer does little better, despite a slave outfit evocative of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of the *Moulin Rouge* (Figure 25). His Leia is a coquette on a chain, not a plucky princess with the courage to lead a rebellion. These works only gloss the character with a Victorian veneer. They are not images of steampunk heroines.

Other Steam Wars revisions take Leia a step further towards being a steampunk heroine but still fall short of the mark. In the earlier discussed *Leia Leading* (Figure 20), Marcel Mercado succeeds where Sillof fails, presenting Leia as Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, uttering a cry of defiance, brandishing the flag of the rebellion, and charging into battle with her pistol raised. However, this is merely an adaptation of Lucas's Leia, who leads the ground assault in the third film but remains tertiary to Luke's battle with Vader and the assault on the second Death Star.

Eric Poulton presents Leia as a woman of sophistication with an edge of bravado, as evidenced by the way in which *Lady Leia Organa, Princess of Alderaan* (Figure 26) wields her formidable pistol:

Figure 26: 'Lady Leia Organa, Princess of Alderaan', Eric Poulton.

More importantly, Poulton's Leia is dressed in late nineteenth-century clothing with a low neckline exposing a lace bodice. Her foot protrudes from underneath her dress, revealing a high black leather boot. Her stance displays an element of swagger: it is a pose one might associate more with Lucas's Han Solo. Poulton's narrative blurb about Lady Leia posits her as a

"fiery, confident personality [with a] sharp intellect […] a very strong and influential diplomat[,] extremely critical of Imperial policies" and includes imagined biographical information, such as studies at a private school and a stint in the military before joining the 'Resistance' (Poulton 2008c). While this Leia has the propriety requisite with the historical era Poulton is drawing from, one commenter on the image lauded it as being "even more heroic and interesting than the movie version" (Dane 2008), and it remains the closest representation of a genuine steampunk heroine offered in the Steam Wars images thus far.

While often arrayed in traditional Victorian attire, steampunk heroines strut with as much bluster as their male counterparts and express their sexuality in overtly sensual ways. Verne's Lady Monroe, as played by Natalie Rantanen of the *Legion Fantastique* of San Francisco, exemplifies the feminine steampunk aesthetic. At the *Steam Powered* convention, she appeared one day in traditional East Indian dress, based on apparel Verne's character would have worn in the mid 1850s. Her dress incorporated all the proper Victorian underpinnings (chemise, stockings, corset, bloomers, petticoats) and a crinoline with extra petticoats to produce the desired shape, completed by an Indian sari and gold dipped jewellery made of Swarovski crystals or traditional glass beads. The last day of the convention she appeared in a mix of feminine and masculine attire (Figure 27):

Figure 27: Natalie Rantanen as Lady Monroe. **© 2008 Mike Perschon**

Figure 28: Natalie Rantanen, Dark Garden Unique Corsetry display, Dickens Fair 2008.

Natalie donned men's black under-bust racer back vest, tight trousers, leather boots, and top hat with goggles attached, completed with a gothic tailcoat with gold accents and buckles from a Lolita shop in Japan, while brandishing dual functional ball and powder pistols. At the 2008 Dickens Fair in San Francisco, Rantanen modelled for *Dark Garden*, makers of custom corsets, reclining on a couch in Victorian lingerie (Figure 28), consisting of a silk brocaded facsimile of a late nineteenth-century corset, ruffled can-can shorts called 'spankies', and black stockings with red silk bows (not visible in the image), while holding a blunder-buss style ray gun (Rantanen 2008). Save for her blonde hair, these images could be of the Steam Wars Leia: the traditional princess, the woman of adventure, and the sexual woman of agency – not held captive, but holding her admirers captive instead.

Björn Hurri's *Leia* encapsulates these variant aspects nicely in a single image (Figure 29):

Figure 29: 'Princess Leia', Björn Hurri.

Hurri's Leia, like the others, holds a pistol with a confidence belying her ability with the weapon. The weapon and ammunition belts around her hips

attest her proficiency with the weapon as more than just a fashion item, afterthought, or item of desperate necessity despite lack of capability. Her attire is a hodgepodge of masculine and feminine elements. The requisite goggles indicate that her role in the high-flying adventure amongst her male counterparts is neither incidental nor inferior; the open neck of her shirt (which appears to be a man's), exposing the cleavage of her breasts augmented by her leather corset, could be taken as objectification, were it not for the ubiquity of corseted cleavage amongst steampunk costumes at *Steam Powered*, *Steamcon*, and *The Nova Albion Steampunk Exhibition*. Spiritual sister to Rantanen's Lady Monroe, this Leia would likely have charmed Jabba with her wiles before killing him, so that by the time Luke arrived, she would have been calmly drinking tea, while waiting for Han to thaw from his carbonite freeze – the steampunk damsel without distress.

4. Closing Reflections

In her study of space opera, steampunk's close literary cousin, Patricia Monk abandons the project of definition altogether. Instead, she describes space opera not as

> a collection of texts but an attitudinal bias […] betrayed by the monomythic romance mode, action-adventure plot […] optimism, social naïveté […] fudge factors […], minimal proleptic continuity, conflict (human/human or alien/human) in both stories and subsequently novels. (Monk 1992: 300)

One could easily say the same about steampunk, substituting "attitudinal bias" for "aesthetic", or conclude that "attitudinal bias" is a type of literary aesthetic, communicated in words rather than visuals. Frank Cioffi notes that the setting of space opera is superfluous to the narrative action:

> [T]here is little need for the action to take place in space at all. The stories consist merely of heroes and villains, cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians, at a very superficial and childish remove. The space setting seems only a clanking, technological backdrop, they argue, for old-fashioned 'shootouts and action'. (Cioffi 1982: 57)

Similarly, I would argue that within the majority of steampunk texts, the Victoriana is largely superfluous to the narrative; the steam setting is only a "clanking, technological backdrop" as well. Nevertheless, that same Victorian context is necessary to invoke the applied aesthetic that people identify as 'steampunk'.

A close analysis of the Steam Wars artwork has demonstrated how, while steampunk lacks fixed definition, both the literary and fashion culture share an aesthetic containing common elements, such as exposed-but-unexplained magical technology, nostalgia, and high-flying heroics. Works such as Steam Wars are instructive in determining this aesthetic, resulting as they do from art and fashion subculture appropriations of steampunk literature by Jeter, Gibson, and Blaylock. This aesthetic will likely continue to evolve. Given steampunk's propensity to inadvertently adopt Victorian attitudes toward racial minorities, as evidenced in images of Steam Wars villains, or toward women, as certain images of the Steam Wars Leia demonstrated, this ability to evolve possesses a positive quality. Pastiche by its very nature, steampunk has the potential to adapt its aesthetic to better reflect its stated intentions, to reject negative colonial and sexist attitudes and ethics in favour of nuanced postcolonial and gender critiques.

As a result, this study should be considered a work-in-progress, an initial attempt at suggesting a steampunk aesthetic. As Stefan Hantke noted in regard to the definition of steampunk, "[c]onsidering how quickly steampunk has fragmented into a bewildering variety of styles, critics would be best off considering their own definitions as working hypotheses, tentative, evolving fictions in themselves" (Hantke 1999: 253). Likewise, the steampunk aesthetic laid out by this close analysis of online Steam Wars images is a working hypothesis, a playful examination of these fictions as they evolve, hoping both to be descriptive of, and prescriptive to, a literature, art, and fashion culture in vaporous flux.

Notes

1. To cite all of the online debates and articles concerning the definition of steampunk should be considered one of the tasks of Hercules. For a few of the highest profile debates, readers might begin by searching Google for the phrase "Steampunk definition".

2. The term 'Steam Wars' comes from the name of Sillof's line of steampunk-modified Star Wars action figures.
3. For full images of the LEGO model of 'Falcon of the Millennium', see http://www.reasonablyclever.com/lego/falcon/index.html.
4. 'Rail Haven' is not a Steam Wars image; it is included as an example of the potential of rail travel in a Steam Wars secondary world.
5. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, Yoda, like Kenobi is living in self-exile; Yoda lives on Dagobah, a swamp planet devoid of other intelligent life.
6. Sillof describes his aesthetic choices concerning Steam Wars Jedi armour in his blurb about the Obi-Wan Kenobi figure. He states that he wanted the armour to evoke "the feel of an elderly warrior who put on his old armor for one last adventure", offering Kenobi as a Don Quixote type. He refers to the armour as "antique", "riveted", "old, tarnished, and little rusty [sic]" (Sillof 2006-2007a).

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