Creating the Future-Past: Understanding Steampunk as Triadic Movement

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Steampunk is a cultural phenomenon which takes a different shape than many other subcultures and countercultures which have proceeded it. This new shape is a significant variation from the paradigm and can be interpreted as a model of socio-cultural progression. By blending opposites like future and past, humanism and technology, this subcultural phenomenon offers symbolic solution model by way of triadic movement and transcendent function. Steampunk seems to be created and defined from the bottom up in that it tries to collapse hierarchies, use creativity and innovative thinking to solve problems and to challenge limits, and uses anachronism, retrofuturism, speculative and alternate realms to inspire individuals and groups to re-imagine and redress the issues and paradigms which have limited them. Through research, interview, participant observation and analysis, this piece explores and explains how the productions and interactions of a small groups of people can offer alternative solutions to a perceived intractable binary towards in both symbolic and tangible ways.
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Prologue

Subcultures of the mid to late 20th century are what drew me to cultural anthropology, in particular what fascinated me was the ways which subcultures centered around music articulated community and performed identity. However, upon entering the discipline in 2006 and engaging with the topic in a more analytical manner, I began to notice that the climate of music-centered subcultures was changing rapidly. The most notably change I observed was a shift towards a balkanization of genres\(^1\) and fans\(^2\) where I had once noticed dynamic cultural groups being more multifarious in their composition of individuals, art forms. There was a pronounced shift from the eclectic nature of the urban tribe to the more insular, rigidly defined niche ideal. Part of this tendency towards smaller, more homogenous and newer subgenres - which were often revivals of old genres (Americana) or curious appropriations of the characteristics more recent genres but with new name (Emo) - was heightened communication offered by the internet and the features of web 2.0. The internet has served people of obscure interests and tastes very well by connecting them to each other, to the artists and ideas they enjoy and support offered methods for supporting those things and enclaves.

The connectivity through networks, search engines, fan forums in congress with the long tail\(^3\) model of selling more of less seems to have influenced this phenomenon. While the methods and media were changing, I personally felt an absence of ‘new’ cultural phenomena that pulled divergent groups together particularly a movement, a

\(^1\) [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/arts/music/21herm.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/arts/music/21herm.html), Rock’s Balkanized Route to the Indies

\(^2\) [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/arts/music/03indie.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/arts/music/03indie.html), When Indie-Rock Genres Outnumber the Bands

moment, that venerated the quirky, romantic, divergent thinking and good natured
oddities of all kinds. Any sort of deviation from the norm, from the binary\(^4\) of popular or
acceptable other, was a source of some suspicion. The absence of this choice felt like a
rift which couldn't be ignored and would need to be bridged, in my mind.

**Introduction**

When I realized that what had initially drew me to the field was rapidly evolving
and that my concentration in general had to be re-envisioned, that is when I turned my
focus to quirky stylistic expression that had just begun to capture my imagination. Over
the past few years, I have been studying the emerging Steampunk movement from the
critical cultural perspective. During is period os study, about 2007 to the present, I've
observed this curious community of retro-futurism enthusiasts, it has blossomed,
spawning a thriving metropolis of culture: blogs\(^5\), web resources,\(^6\) fan-cons\(^7\), etsy stores,
museum exhibits\(^8\), performance art groups\(^9\), an inspired philosophy\(^10\) and aesthetic\(^11\)
which advocates creativity, innovation, sustainability and elegance. Even more
impressively this unique, quasi-historic, entirely imaginative, quixotic movement has
made a deep impression of mainstream media\(^12\), fashion\(^13\) and graphic design in just the
few years it has really found itself. It's been very exciting the observe and experience a

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\(^5\) [http://steampunkworkshop.com/](http://steampunkworkshop.com/)

\(^6\) [http://www.steampunktribune.com/](http://www.steampunktribune.com/)

\(^7\) [http://steampunkworldsfair.com/](http://steampunkworldsfair.com/)

\(^8\) [www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/exhibits/steampunk](http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/exhibits/steampunk)


\(^12\) [http://www.newsweek.com/2007/10/30/steampunking-technology.html](http://www.newsweek.com/2007/10/30/steampunking-technology.html), [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1945343,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1945343,00.html)

\(^13\) Past Present; One Small Step for Man, SUZY MENKES, Published: March 11, 2007, New York Times
cultural expression that is so distinctive yet comprehensive ascend to influence mainstream culture, grow in its own sphere and in take form in a progressive and feasibly paradigmatic way.

My interest in this community as an aesthetic and performative movement and emerging subculture is from a specific notion that steampunk's elevation of creativity, imagination, elegance and innovation combined with its inclusivity creates a new model for making community. Many questions have informed my approach to this phenomenon. Why has this movement developed and grown? Are there sociological or economic factors to be considered? What communities in concert with other cultural factors engendered this amalgam of steampunk? The unique, quirky composition of steampunk I assert is especially compelling due to its speculative fiction, alternate realm and retrofuturist elements which compels people to 'think outside the box'. One of them most distinctive aspects of this Victorian science fiction based subculture is the way it counteracts conspicuous consumption with handmade elegance and exalts tinkering and discovery. This is a quality which had been sidelined for the past several years in mainstream culture in favor of name brand luxury items or on the other extreme a trend towards cheap, disposable goods. Although there has been a strong indie craft movement in the mid to late aughts, it is my opinion that the level of quality and artisanship of the products is generally higher in the iteration of craft culture within steampunk. To my mind, steampunk is a contemporary golden age of DIY craft culture a la the Arts and Craft movement of the 1900's.

14 Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster, Dana Thomas, 2008
15 Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture, Ellen Ruppel Shell, 2009
It should be noted that the phenomenon is more than simply an aesthetic or a style, the significance of the movement is the community insofar as how it makes meaning and definitions on its own terms. As I've studied and experienced the culture and community, I've been fascinated by the dynamic ways in which the actions of the groups move towards a more comprehensive whole. For example, its inclusivity, its accessibility, its focus on self-sufficiency and hands on creation, which I interpret as embodying solutions for issues in contemporary culture (e.g. consumerism, living beyond one's means, scarcity of resources). This community, in action and in abstract, holds the tension of our times by combining elements of both utopian and dystopian future, with a speculative/alternate realm. My assertion is that this is an example of a transcendent function. I find that steampunk is a reconciliation of the past and present; utopian and dystopian; art and science; self and society and that the resulting synthesis is the emergence of a transcendent function.16

This synthesis of opposites into a realm of possibilities, in the symbolic space of culture and countercultural forms, beyond the perceived political, economic, psychological impasses in this contemporary moment is striking.

Although this is happening on a relatively small scale, the fact that this synthesis, that steampunk (retrofuturism via technology and Victoriana) is being folded into

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16 “The transcendent function is essentially an aspect of the self-regulation of the psyche. It typically manifests symbolically and is experienced as a new attitude toward oneself and life. It's a psychic function that arises from the tension between consciousness and the unconscious and supports their union. In a conflict situation, or a state of depression for which there is no apparent reason, the development of the transcendent function depends on becoming aware of unconscious material”. (Jung Lexicon, http://www.nyaap.org/index.php/id/7/subid/60, June 1, 2010)
mainstream fashion\textsuperscript{17}, design, popular entertainment\textsuperscript{18}, décor etc. and is being accepted is fascinating. Even more importantly, the ways steampunk within itself creates a space of coexistence wherein participants can symbolically redress larger conflicts. (i.e. the recycle, reuse, refurbish ethos as a way of managing issues of ecology, of natural and financial resources.) The accepting of seemingly conflicting ideas is an indication that culturally we may be more capable of accepting contradictions, moving past them, and better positioned to imagine and implement solutions.

This is deeply significant in relation to the difficulties the U.S. has faced over past decade such as being involved in multiple wars, the current economic crisis regarded as the worst in 80 years and facing difficulties in the area of environmental issues and resources for its citizens. In many ways the culture is healing from previous traumas. Thinking of the culture of the aughts as function of society's need to breaking things down into their smallest, most tangible, simplest parts in order to manage them better and as an attempt to to make sense of what is happening because we have yet to make sense of what has happened seems to hold. The idea that simple is always better and the complexity is something to be distrustful of was the axiom of the aughts. As a society we seemed to re-establish ourselves, but fear, anxiety and simplistic thinking seemed to hinder the development of complex and nuanced ideas necessary for moving forward and moving on and resolving contemporary difficulties.

During that time some were making meaning in divergent ways and were gathering to create cohesive groups of well-integrated miscellanea by which they were

\textsuperscript{17} http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/fashion/12CODES.html?_r=2&ref=style
This Just in From the 1890s, David Colman, Nov. 11, 2009

\textsuperscript{18} The Prestige (2006), The Golden Compass (2007), Serenity (2005)
meeting the need for a more comprehensive, holistic way of forming culture. This need for wholeness and complexity were being woven by several groups and forces: the D.I.Y. (do it yourself) or maker movement, the roots of cyberpunk, craft culture, Burning Man philosophy and aesthetic, the democratic nature the internet as a resource and model for open source accessibility. These factors in part and in whole shaped and continue to define the culture and community of steampunk. This community and philosophy fills the void of a quirky, geeky, artistic, romantic choices in the countercultural landscape of the in the mid part of the 2000's. Moreover, steampunk's origin story and evolution is transformative in that it breaks with conventional notions of how subcultures are created, defined and commodified. (Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, 1981). The ways in which steampunk is defined by what it consumes rather than what it creates is meaningful, proactive and subversive in a consumer driven culture.

This piece focuses on the emergence and context of steampunk of course, but the reason that this phenomena is so interesting is the very condition that makes it so complicated to study; it is as unique as it is broad and it's constantly evolving. The whimsical nature of this aesthetic/philosophical approach to living creating s singular yet not narrowly defined as the culture that is being emulated is the world that never was and always re-imagined. As something of an outsider slash observer participant, trying to define steampunk is a bit paradoxical, however I have developed a conceptual framework which informs my approach and directs the the reader.
A Framework of Steampunk

“When we speak the word "life," it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach.” *Antonin Artaud*

Steampunk is not a place or a thing. Like constellation, it is not a single star, or one point but it is the shape created by the multiplicity of points including the person interpreting the phenomena his/herself. Steampunk is a post-postmodern subculture community phenomenon in that it is not defined by a place, a class, a kind, or art form. It is a verb, it is a style, it is a philosophy, more than anything, it as an approach or worldview. It is an intent as much as it is the result. This community is defined by what it creates rather than what it consumes. Here is a 'definition' from the editor of *Steampunk Magazine*.

“Steampunk has always been a melting pot of ideas, where the present and the past intertwine with the fantasies of our own imaginations—and too often are those imaginations restricted by the silent rule that, in order for something to be steampunk, it has to be Victorian. In fact, we should reject that seemingly unbreakable connection just as thoroughly as we reject suggestions that steampunk should be nothing more than historical re-enactment. We should expand our horizons before the Victorian age becomes the rope by which we hang ourselves—until we become little more than the meme which our detractors claim us to be. “ – C. Allegra Hawksmoor (Steampunk Magazine, Issue 6)

There are many subcultures, genres and communities that contribute to steampunk demographic composition such as: geek culture, burner culture, dark alternative culture, gamer culture, maker culture, young adult literature or sci-fi fantasy fans. They all are drawn together by a particular curiosity, an ingenuity and an open source approach they find accepted and enacted here. The openness, the acceptance and whimsical nature of
steampunk is the core of what makes this phenomenon and it's participants the potential to create something long lasting. From my experience, one of the most sincere subcultures in that since steampunk values not on the superficial but on the potential of its participants. Since the genre, the culture is 'located' in the imaginations and interactions of the participants, cultural capital is really based on how imaginative/innovative/well-executed or clever your piece is. There is really very little posturing, scenery, fronting because no level of affectation can surpass the handcrafted, bespoken aura of authenticity\textsuperscript{19} in a 'steampunked' piece.

\textbf{What is Steampunk?}

Steampunk is an aesthetic and expressive movement based on the speculative and fiction of the late 20th century; alternate history fantasy of “Gaslight London” or any variety of speculative realms with a retrofuturist touch. Steampunking is the craft of taking modern technology affecting or re-imagining the piece with Edwardian/Victorian style mixed in with a more rugged sensibility. The culture puts curiosity, benevolence of technology, and using one's own hands and mind above all else. Since steampunk has its tinkerer roots in cyberpunk, there is sometimes a thread of dystopian, post-apocalyptic self-reliance to the aesthetic. A particular thread that is best represented in the creativity and utility of those in the Burner culture and the industrial Victoriana look.

What makes steampunk particularly fun and important to study is how diverse the range of expressions are. It's in comics, games, wearable art, industrial sculpture, literature, design, stage/performance. In this way steampunk is as much an approach as it

\textsuperscript{19} Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction}, 1935
is a 'style'. While some find the trappings of the phenomenon a little trite – the essence of steampunk is more than sepia, gears and goggles- it is re-defined and re-imagined by the community though each invention.

From a socio-anthropological perspective the most compelling feature of steampunk is not found in the breadth of its definition, or the nuances of its origin, or even in the passionate creations of its enthusiasts; the most intriguing aspects of steampunk lie in its very evolution, particularly the ways in which it diverges from the traditional notions and established characteristics of contemporary subculture. I assert that steampunk is: 1) a post-post-modern subculture 2) is possibly a harbinger for the ways subcultures, countercultures and alternative communities may develop in the future 3) that the 'shape' of this movement, the contours, arch and construct of this phenomena/subculture is divergent and 4) that the structure of this modality is positive and will be successful for reasons to be elucidated later in this piece.

The ways which steampunk puts forth a new example, a new understanding of how countercultural communities develop as well as influence the mainstream culture is by far its most elaborate and imaginative creation. Much can be gleaned from how that divergence of form (shape) from the expected arch of culture creates a new iteration of cultural form(mat). At its best it creates a new paradigm of the way countercultures (alternative cultures) are realized vis a vis the ways individuals and groups reshape, re-imagine and redefine what is the established (considered) fact regarding cycles of fashion or the pendulum of opinion, or relationship of meaning, message and expression.
Defining Terms

To best articulate that shifting paradigm, I shall use the term phenomenon (or phenomena) when referring to steampunk as an entity in order to be inclusive of all its moving parts. This term most adequately encompasses the breadth of what I hope to get across when calling on the concept of steampunk. Phenomena while broad and a little abstract allows for the variety of ways that steampunk culture manifests itself: technology modification, clothing, lifestyle, fan-cons, e-zines, craft, sculpture, music, film, video games, role playing games, cosplay, literature (science fiction, fantasy, young adult), graphic design, interior design, home decor, philosophy/ethos, the variety of recreationist communities, other allied interest groups, etc. When discussing interactions of individuals and small groups among each other I will prefer the term community and when speaking in particular of the aesthetic, the tenets and philosophy of steampunk, I will use the term approach or ethos in order to communicated the expanse, flexibility, and openness that characterizes steampunk. The term phenomena/on will also help to disambiguate from the term subculture which has been eschewed by practitioners in forums²⁰, but which is still valuable for comparative purposes. In this exercise subculture is the most useful framework insofar as it is for a familiar form and helps us conceptualize what is the status quo and where the shifts are occurring. Put another way, the act of choosing a new term can be thought of as signaling the progressive characteristics that I have observed and interpret in the lived experience and embodiment of steampunk. To my mind, a breaking of form is symbolic of a motivated transcendence, a synthesis. (Thusly, terms like lifestyle, trend, and the like will be

avoided as they fail to capture the what it emerging and actually contradict, constrict the level of understanding.)

Usually when we think of subcultures, modern tribes, alternative groups the most common word to encapsulate that phenomenon is community. In this piece the term community should be thought of in a broad sense, more like a collection. The common usage doesn't adequately describe the network, common interests, and coexistent qualities of steampunks quite communicate the philosophy, the aesthetic and the diversity of individuals who make up the wide ranging and mixed world of steampunk. This community is certainly not homogenous. For example, steampunks come from and very importantly they maintain ties to many communities (hackers, burners, makers, gamers, goths, crafters, geeks and enthusiasts of all kinds.)

**Qualities of the Phenomenon Vis a Vis the Contemporary Counterculture**

A very distinctive quality of steampunk is that its practitioners often belong to multiple communities simultaneously and can claim multiple identities concurrently. This is done without any, or very little, conflict or tension. In fact, I assert that it's this pluralistic amalgamation that keeps the community dynamic and the phenomenon strong and that the framing of the never-was-but-could-have-been space gives individuals, and the group, permission to collapse binaries and therefore create more accepting spaces.

Being a steampunk doesn't preclude one from participating in other groups, this which differentiates it from many other comparable or contemporary subcultures movements or genres in a fairly remarkable way. In fact, the community is fairly
 omnivorous and in areas where groups historically have been fairly rigid, steampunk is quite fluid. One's participation in multiple groups or multiple skill sets is seen as an asset, not a lack of commitment to the group. For example, one can be deemed 'unmetal' by listening to bands or engaging in activities that are not considered unmetal or a satisfactory corollary. While this categorization of things metal and gunmetal is usually done in a lighthearted way, there is a bit of truth to it. This indulgence would be seen as an affront to the group, a type of rejection of metal culture and an insult to those in the community in some way. Again, this is often pointed out in jest, but the importance of ones authenticity and how that authenticity relates to the perceived safety of the groups' identity it notable. However if someone with enough cultural capitol or credibility deviates from the path, then the deviation is accepted, even embraced. Another example of exclusivity in subculture, one would find it fairly difficult to be straight edge (someone who abstains from drugs & alcohol and usually listens to punk/hardcore music) while also being an active clubber, raver (someone who listens to Techno/House music and a culture where drug use is prevalent). This would be seen as a contradiction and would be a reason to questions one's authenticity and 'dedication' to the community. This doesn't seem to be the case in the steampunk community. The dictum seems to be not either or but, both or more.

While the lived experience is far more nuanced, the curators, tastemakers and those who call themselves guards of the counterculture can take an authoritative position and will take a person to task as being a phony, somehow insincere to the community if an individual contradicts a tenet of the subculture. Constructs that were social webs and
performances of identity become limited and binding, defined by an elite and continuing a top-down distribution of power. A structure I observe certain groups to be moving away from (e.g. industrial and user experience designers, open source practitioners) these modalities as things like divergent thinking, crowd sourcing and user interaction and experience become valuable. Where boundaries are blurred, fusions are born, yet when fusions arrive skeptics evoke the concept of old school. A concept that what 'real', true or authentic is held very tightly by cultural gate keepers but often is not what is performed or practiced by the typical person. Begging the question does a culture created by the populace but guarded by individuals granted the 'defenders of authenticity' a false authority? This seems to be a contradiction which steampunk over comes, generally, though purists exist in any space. Though claiming that there is a 'correct' version of a speculative realm or alternate history is a fairly ridiculous assertion, which my be the seeming triumph over the inconsistency.

This purity motif also operates in the indie subculture in several ways which are quite unlike the manner in which steampunk functions. For example, when an Indie or underground artist becomes successful and one's own cultural capital is intimately tied to one's perception or projection as 'indie' then one will distance themselves from the artist or at least note that they enjoyed the artist/band before they sold out to maintain one's integrity instead of supporting an artist in their success. This is one of many ways were Indie, and many on other countercultures, are in fact by not subverting the dominant ideology but merely inverting it and perpetuating it. Another way in which Indie culture\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21}The hipster might be the "embodiment of postmodernism as a spent force, revealing what happens when pastiche and irony exhaust themselves as aesthetics," or might be "a kind of permanent cultural middleman in hypermediated late capitalism, selling out alternative sources of social power developed by outsider groups." http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/the-death-of-the-hipster Rob Horning April 2009
seems to hold to a purity motif, albeit in somewhat puzzling way, is regard to Indie music. The genre of Indie music is populated by so many subgenres and sub-subgenres the result is something of a pointillist composition. My interpretation of the mushrooming of all this individual genres which may or may not have had unique, separate or disparate qualities, is that it was an effort to exalt cool, chic and the authentic. People chose to deconstruct music, a la Derrida, in order to get to the essence of mood or spirit of the art. Yet, the result moved more towards a balkanization of people and forms, possibly towards the absence of substance and structure, most certainly and the privileging of the ultra-niche. This is especially remarkable in that the height of Indie culture in the aughts was contemporaneous with the rumblings of the retrofuturism phenomenon. The way in which these cultures, the approaches are so diametrically opposed to each other suggests that the latter is an answer to the call of the first. In sense steampunk and phenomena of this 'shape' can bee seen as a movement to wards a more complete, synthesized whole.

In this way steampunk, at least up to this point in its development, breaks with the traditional modalities of modern subculture by allowing for multiple and concurrent identities to coexist in one person, as well as within the group. The social and intellectual model of steampunk transcends binaries and negates the idea that one must be true/pure or faithful to a subculture in order to be a part of it. This more pluralistic approach is important in that steampunks don't hold their multiple identities merely in juxtaposition or tension or conflict, in fact, steampunk often draws from its multiple communities and locations which seems to be consistent to with the postmodern counterculture. That is to

say if we understand postmodern subcultures to be characterized by separation, differences.

There has been quite a bit of discussion on community boards\textsuperscript{23} and forums\textsuperscript{24} as to the nature of steampunk as in whether it is a subculture, a community, a counterculture or something completely different. In his 2008 Steampunk Convention keynote address Jake von Slatt said:

“I have a bit of a confession to make; I don't really know what Steampunk is. Genre, aesthetic, movement, sub-culture, style, all of these terms have been used to describe it but none quite capture the richness and variety I see in this community. Unlike past sub-cultures steampunk seems to have formed from the merger of multiple interests that contain within them a common thread. How else do you explain a sub-culture that brings together people of such divergent experience? Why in the very room I'll bet we have writers, costumers, electronic hobbyists, live steam enthusiasts, corset makers, artists, blacksmiths, scrap bookers, photographers, musicians, and people who engage in every other creative endeavor you can imagine!”

Von Slatt’s statement represents my point of view perfectly. While good arguments have been made for and against all of these (genre, aesthetic, movement, sub-culture, style) a consensus has never been reached, nor do any of these terms (community, subculture, counterculture, etc.) seem satisfying when discussing the topic in an all encompassing way, so rather than use a term that is contentious to the group or inadequately communicates the range of states and expressions within the culture, I will side-step the issue and use the better suited word phenomenon.

The choice of this term is not solely decided by the community I studied. The choice is also motivated by the philosophical and epistemological tools I used to approach the question of, and thusly interpret, the development of steampunk.

\textsuperscript{23} brassgoggles.co.uk/forum/index.php
\textsuperscript{24} www.steampunkmagazine.com/forum/
Triadic Movement

Some may interpret steampunk's emulation of a time that never was to be something of a contradiction, however I disagree. It took me some time to make sense of I was observing and why a contradiction seemed to me to feel like a positive choice. While grappling with the concept of retrofuturism and the seeming dichotomy historical science fiction culture, I came across Hegel's concept of triadic movement:

“In the philosophy of Hegel, the inevitable transition of thought, by contradiction and reconciliation, from an initial conviction to its opposite and then to a new, higher conception that involves but transcends both of them. symbolic / classical / romantic. Since he identified reality with thought, Hegel believed that the same triadic movement is to be found in nature, cultural progress, and history.”  

This concept perfectly encapsulated the unique form which I noticed in steampunk's manifestations: it's community, it's forms, it's production, it's emergence. Steampunk resides neither past future or necessarily the present- it transcends time. It is set neither in the past, nor completely in the future, or even the present. It is a culture-ethos-approach that exists the imagined future-past. The ways in which this phenomenon breaks with the traditional form of subculture, breaks the paradigms sociologist and other theorists understand subculture and phenomenological movements express themselves is, in itself, an illustration of this. 

One example of how this model appears in the culture is that many steampunks create characters, this is not an attempt to deceive or about posturing or some sort of escapist behavior. It functions and more like the intellectual, emotional embodiment of

25 http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/t.htm, Philosophical Dictionary, Hegel's thesis | antithesis | synthesis,
steampunk's transcendent quality: the creation of a character that one would like to be or mirrors something you like about oneself that others may not see and that a person like to share with the world. It works in a wonderfully, figurative and symbolic way.

The beauty of steampunk lies in its form and as well as its practice. The 'shape' of the phenomenon is particularly interesting. The most compelling aspect of steampunk is how it transcends the push pull, progress-regress dichotomy that often comes to mind when we think of countercultures or subculture. To understand this phenomenon we must conceive of steampunk as more than a juxtaposition and see past its superficial paradox. It is in fact an enmeshed coexistence of technology and the 'organic', positive relationship with technology, resilience in the apocalypse. To understand this phenomenon we must conceive of steampunk as more than a juxtaposition and see past its superficial paradox. It is in fact an enmeshed coexistence of technology and the 'organic', positive relationship with technology, resilience in the apocalypse.

This is the post-postmodern counter-community- not to be thought of in terms of either or but, more adequately conceived of as beyond. Steampunk is related to but not deeply tied to variety of genres, as I've described. It also has as many interpretations as there individuals who participate in it. The community welcomes a variety of interpretations from the post-apocalyptic to Neo-Victorian, sci-fi to tribal, Art Nouveau muses to pith-helmeted explorers. Yet it never becomes a murky amalgam, the components of style and philosophy more often then not keep their integrity and serve the phenomenon in it's broadest sense quite well. It's as if the diversity of ideas and identities only serve to add detail, not detract. Another way in which this phenomenon is changing
the template of subculture is through the status of the self and in relation to the group. Individuals can function in multiple realms concurrently without conflict to their allegiance to another group. The individuals who participate in a variety of other spheres—geek culture, maker culture, recreation culture—have all found themselves at home in steampunk world. Even within its own framework steampunk reconciles contradictions. One variation in steampunk, dieselpunk, draws its aesthetic from the post-apocalyptic realm which on the surface may contradict the softer elements of the Victorian era sensibility in steampunk, yet it is folded in to the plurality of the community by way of its expression of utility, ingenuity and self-reliance.

The quality which is fundamental to steampunk is making things from old things to make something new. Creating things which didn't exist before, only in one's imagination. It fills in what was missing in a larger way from the collective conscious. I've found that Hegel's triadic movement is complementary to Jung's transcendent function “The emergence of the third resolves the split between dynamic polar tensions within the archetypal structure.” and his concept that 'the psyche tends toward wholeness' offered me an insight into: 1) the motivations of the phenomenon of a psychological level and 2) a my interest in this phenomenon, that sense I had that something was 'missing' culturally. People make what is missing, that is the essence of art and culture. Makers make what is missing, through their actions and creations they are resolving tensions.

One thing the community is excellent at is creating moods, spaces and environments through design, through participation, through aesthetics and personal interaction. I suggest that these environments serve a symbolic function and exist as
allegories for the improvements people want to feel in the world around them. For example, the very bespoken nature of every much thing in steampunk can be considered a reaction to the ipodification of our technology culture and disposable society created by cheap credit and cheaper goods. In the framework of steampunk value, worth authenticity is calculated by a different rubric than in mainstream society, it comes from making goods and asking questions, living in a more enlightened manner. Steampunk exalts a time when creativity, innovation, artisans, intellectuals, eccentrics, explorers of the broadest horizons were respected. This is in direct contrast to the zeitgeist of the Bush era, post 9-11 era, post-Columbine era.

In another, somewhat idiosyncratic example of steampunks always evolving Hegelian nature, the Disney company has released a steampunk inspired pin series (pins as in brooches) of its most beloved characters. While to many of the denizens view this release as the moment when steampunk culture became co-opted and that the Disneyfication of the culture is surely a sign of its imminent demise. However, Mike Perschon of steampunkscholar.com offers an astute analysis of why this not only a misinformed assumption as to what Disney's acknowledgment of the movement means, but draws out how Disney's films, artists and amusement parks have actually defined and offered the prototypes of Steampunk.

It's cliché to describe how practitioners/participants in a subculture wretch and writhe when symbols of their culture are appropriated by corporations to signal their own hipness and attempt to transform that 'withitness' into cultural capital. And this example

of Steampunk Disney follows that trope. Yet the difference lies in that many of the characteristics of (visual) steampunk have been articulated by Disney films for the better part of 55 years. Certainly the present form of the culture is unique in its place, time, interpretation and creation of its ethos and symbols, but to answer the question posed earlier in this paper as to why steampunk aesthetic design, which should be foreign to contemporary sensibilities, has integrated into the popular culture so well. Again, a meta example of how steampunk is shifting the paradigm of subculture towards a more informed whole.

**Rewriting the Present from the Future-Past**

As I have asserted in this piece that steampunk is a different form and this difference in form is unique and worth examining. In that, to a more pronounced degree than some of the contemporary and previous subcultures, steampunk is phenomena that gathers practices, productions in a lateral way. Put simply, it creates a space where most anyone is welcome. Most often we think of subcultures are thought to be exclusive, defined by a select few and usually from the top down where as steampunk as a phenomenon best defined by its level of inclusivity. It its structure is best understood as 'flat' into the development and distribution of ideas, practices and style. It's my position that as a cultural anthropologist and a a critical analyst of cultural forms it is my task to “discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surface of style to trace them out as maps of meaning which obscurely represent the very contradictions they are meant to resolve or conceal.” (Hebdige 1977, 18) But in steampunk spaces, real and
virtual, the only prerequisite is imagination, enthusiasm, and a sincere interest. Though a
talent with crafts, machines, technology, and a good sense of humor doesn't hurt. This
feature calls to mind more the possibilities of the phenomena than what the idea
precludes; through being inclusive and flexible steampunk embodies, enacts and
embraces many of the aspects of a post-everything (post-apocalyptic, post-human, maybe
post-racial, post-postcolonial) utopian society.

In the postmodern ephemera, what a culture feels like, what it seems like, can be
more important than what it is. Put another way, the feel or appearance carries more
weight than an actual definition. For example, if one identifies or is identified as part of a
group, if one defines as Indie, while there are many ways to express one's 'indie-ness' but,
likewise, there are very particular things that can negate or lessen one's indie-ness and
loose credibility. The indie culture while it has similar attitudes or some characteristics
of cultural movements that came before it, indie culture emulated several of the faults of
the dominant culture, most notably the appropriation of symbols and signifiers and
through a combination of commodification and misdirected bricolage which can
sometimes render the meaning of the symbol void. Consequently, the Indie subculture is
more easily defined by what it isn't rather than what it is; a qualitative aspect that is
ephemeral and constantly changing and defined and that narrowness of definition. The
paradox of the postmodern subculture. Not what it is, but what it feels like. Defined by
what other people feel like.

It's ostensibly my position that the Indie culture of the 2000's was defined not by
what it created, but instead by what it consumed. (Pabst Blue Ribbon, American Apparel,
Apple, fixed gear bikes, pitchforkmusic.com). The importance placed on irony and thus ironic detachment, and kitsch as part of the indie identity has the air of deception to it, or at least the intent to confuse. While this layering of finely coordinated and seemingly contradictory meanings is fascinating from a cultural semiotics perspective, it creates a binary at least if not a hierarchy: those who get the joke and those who are the joke. However, there was another thread of the indie culture which was influential to the aesthetic and politics of the scene while certainly being an important ingredient of steampunk, the craft movement. Crafters are a relatively small but very influential movement of artists and entrepreneurs who used the DIY ethos to craft, create and distribute apparel, jewelry, home décor and pretty much anything. This was a revival of the decorative arts and post-feminist comment on culture. The aesthetic was handmade, kitschy, mid-century, retro, cute, funky and usually unpolished. I point these aspects out in order to better explain the climate, or maybe more accurately the counter climate in which steampunk came to prominence and the space it filled in the alternative culture of the aughts and the questions it asked of the dominant culture as well.

This does not appear to be the case within steampunk, neither in the culture, the community, not the expressions. Paradoxically, in this phenomena craftsmanship, imagination, authenticity, are the pinions of the culture even though the worlds it draws from and frameworks it works with in are speculative. Instead of contrast, juxtapositions steampunk offers examples of Janusian thinking and solutions. In this way Marshal McLuren's statement that “the medium is the message” and the ways in which this mode of problem solving through synthesis and the importance there in should be considered
closely. In that we can analyze what collective creative 'need' the steampunk aesthetic and approach seems to fill. Or, more aptly, what answers it provides and what possibilities it offers in a global community in flux.

Steampunk as a Social Cultural Response

Wassily Kandinsky said “form is the outer expression of inner meaning.” (Kandinsky, 1977 29) and while Kandinsky is best remembered for his revolutionary approach to painting and applied design, his observation bears considering in regards to social movements and cultural forms as well. Kandinsky's the form was tangible on the draft table; it was visible on the canvas, with meaning embodied by lines and curve. For the anthropologist the form of culture is abstract too, yet it living and breathing in another. Hence as cultural forms develop, one can extrapolate that this change in form signifies a change in the spirit. One can extrapolate that to include social and culture movements and the intent and the inner meaning as it were. Steampunk certainly looks different especially in comparison to contemporary cultural norms; top hats, goggles,

Subculture at its essence is a form of refusal (Hebdige, 1979, 3) and in a matter of thinking a subculture is a reaction to the present. Most notably, Hebdige pointed out that modern subcultural movements are usually a rejection of the present. By creating a new culture – through signs, signals, practices and expressions- that diverges from the dominant culture a group and the individuals therein is forming a reaction to and rejection of that 'main' culture. If we think of mainstream or popular culture as an expression of the time we live in, it follows that a rejection of that contemporary moment
via its moods, its motives, its products is a refusal to participate in something one (or many) find distasteful. Usually the rejection of the present manifests as a nostalgia for the past (Victorian times, the American 1950's, Medieval times or the Renaissance) or a forward thinking utopia (futurism) or dystopia (cyberpunk) but it is the synthesis of retrofuturism (not an either or but both) approach which seems to signal and important change in the way counterculture, subcultural phenomena is developing. Steampunk is already in pieces and it is the people who have assembled the configuration. They are in control of it, they define it and they will change it as they see fit.

It's worth noting that the contemporary countercultural landscape is vastly different from that of Hebdige's London in the 1970's in that we, particularly those of us in United States circa 2010, operate in construct that I will call a post-alternative. By that I mean a society which as a result of the long-tail of internet commerce and the commodification of nearly a century countercultural signifiers for mainstream or high fashion. It's easy to belong or participate in a 'scene' by affecting the styles and sounds of that culture. It's a simple search and a few clicks away. It is due in part to the prevalence of the internet that the modes of deviating from mainstream music and culture was to get smaller and more concentrated, by creating subgenres, micro-genres fusions and niches. Larger, longer lasting countercultural movements weren't happening quite they way they had ins decades prior, but that may be revealed at a later date.

Something of a pity that while so many people were creating musical alternatives to the mainstream the variety of options became prohibitively overwhelming in a way that balkanized and isolated individuals (or small groups). Those
who in another time, another place may have come together under a larger heading to make a more impressive movement. But as nature abhors a vacuum and our consciousness moves towards wholeness. Those who were discontent with the choices presented or the forms available to them re-imagined a community that they wanted to see. The actualization of a promised future with the grace of the past and the immediacy of the present moment.

**Creating Progressive Models Through Re-imagined, Repurposed Communities**

To what extent are our aesthetics shaped by our socio-political or cultural moment? Is that even a viable question pose in a postmodern mediascape where we can cloister ourselves among like-minded people, more accurately commenters or posters, where our own beliefs reinforced in spaces that allow our most nascent ideas and unreasonable instincts go unchallenged? It may seem antiquated or naive to some to suggest that our aesthetics our modes of creating, communicating and expressing our inner world and how we experience the outer shared world would be related to the ebbs and flows of economics or sociopolitical situations. However it is from that particular vantage point that I situate this part of the piece.

The archetype of the creative spirit, the artist, the writer locked in his or her garret whipped between frenzy and exhaustion by the specters of creative possession or held captive to whims of the muses leads us to imagine creativity as separate from the body that creates it and in someways leads us to conceptualize the separate from this plane of existence. We think of human creativity as otherworldly. But a less fantastical
view of creativity and expression would allow us to see aesthetic creations (art, music, literature, dance, craft, design) in relationship to this world and more tied to other human creations and phenomena (justice, commerce, hierarchies etc). By changing our conceptions of creativity, how it operates and who it operates within, we can think of we can potentially shift the power structure and access to that power; by thinking of the creative potential in each individual and the momentum of our creative potential when we connect with small or large groups to develop a project or achieve a goal is extremely empowering and the sign of an autonomous or egalitarian movement.

Creativity is as real as neurotransmitters and grey matter. The fruits of creativity are tangible but the force behind it is more mysterious, but as Newton concluded much about the laws of physics from a falling apple, so shall we come to understand the momentum or the motivation of what human beings create through the arcs of our cultural forms. It's precisely the 'arcs' of cultural forms which I wish to examine and which I posit are significance and offer a rich text for interpretation, analysis and optimally a greater understanding about the how why and why not's of cultural forms, phenomena in relationship.

From a phenomenological perspective it makes the most sense to think of cultural forms and phenomena, in this case Steampunk through the lens of intersubjectivity. By this I mean one should understand the dynamics and the emergence of this phenomena and its forms so that contemporary social or political events and cultural expression or relationships not as something separate or divorced or categorized against each other, but as elements in conversation and in relation to one another, though the affect may not be
immediately clear or could even be influx. If we take this as a given, then understanding why retro futurists, Burners or artisan crafters, and their activities, are significant for anticipating, or creating the trajectory of mainstream cultural forms and 'common sense' philosophy opens up another mode of understanding.

**The Con, The Fair, and Event Culture Participation**

In the nascent stages of my steampunk scholarship, what intrigued me was seeing cons, fairs, or other community specific events (e.g. Convergence 15, 2009 the Gothic lifestyle con or the Brooklyn Indie Market 2008) began to do Steampunk themes. Before seeing this, I thought it was just a style of dress and design/decor aesthetic. However, around 2009-10, I began to notice many more specifically Steampunk focused cons that were developing. This signaled to me that this was not a fleeting aesthetic fad, but something to be considered more seriously. It also gave me a sense of the size as well as the motivation of the community and that it was in fact, a type community not just a style of dress or costume group like the Lolita or Elegant Gothic Aristocrat culture.

The internet was certainly the space where steampunk, as we currently think of it, was born and the sphere in which lives in to a certain extent especially through blogs, forums, e-zines etc.. But to feel, see, experience and participate in what Steampunk truly is and how it is 'lived' one has to go to a faire or a con. Fancons or fan conventions are regional, local and sometimes national and international gatherings where enthusiasts of different yet complementary genres descend on a small town but usually a hotel for a week or a weekend to live their life full performing/embodying their interest. The most
My observation is that people really felt a need to gather, they wanted to gather and create a Victorian themes or Neo-Victorian experience, with a the hint of a future-past experience. For example SalonCon in 2006, the first steampunk/Neo-Victorian enthusiasts conference. This event encouraged attendees to bring Victorian Era dress and to participate distinctly Victorian customs such as teas, seances, salons, and balls. It should be noted that Neo-Victorianism is a particular thread with in steampunk and though steampunk includes many aspects of Neo-Victorian culture, steampunk tends to be faster and looser with interpretations and often operates more from a position of historical accuracy than from then playing with anachronism. Saloncon ran for three years and although it ceased to be as an event there were many other full Steampunk events would flourish in its wake. The growth of the community, or the collection of genres, groups, subcultures who adopted and expanded the phenomena of steampunk.

The way in which steampunk's aesthetic characteristic are very distinctive and quite specific in regards to the visual aspect (Victorian, industrial), and the philosophy (examine complexity, build big, reuse, re-imagine) & 'location' (the future that never-was) often seemed quite quirky and not immediately accessible to the typical person. For this reason as I began my research, I wondered how much the genre's aesthetics, ideals could really advance. Disbelief is a barrier to entry. Yet, it's been a pleasant surprise to note the interest in, acceptance of and attention to steampunk, however it manifests itself. Perhaps
it is the quirky 'newness' of Steampunk which draws people in, the combination of new and old, of the idea of the present existing in a more ideal realm- the imagination of the past- frees us from the dichotomies which constrain us and our thinking. The way the future-past approach functions as a reconciliation of contradiction to a unique solution is quite appealing; it allows us to engage with time and space in more enlightened ways.

**Thoughts on the Connections of Steampunk to the Phenomenon of Burning Man**

At a screening of the documentary *Dust and Illusions*, by Olivier Bonin a film which explores and situates the phenomena of Burning Man, I had many of my speculations about the interconnectedness of steampunk/maker/burner culture confirmed and had other questions raised. After the showing the director had a Q&A, one of the audience members posed an interesting question, one which I found very resonant, she asked why the documentary focused on the visual artists more than musicians. She compared the film to another documentary on Burning Man, Beyond Black Rock, and noted the same absence of music in the film but underscored its ubiquitous presence at the event. The director's response was that that there were so many threads in the story, it was impossible to accent each one equally. Fair enough. Sill, the absence of musicians in the film seemed notable to me too. And brought to mind how music is not the main motivation behind steampunk and that likewise the strength of the community was in the immediacy of the experiences. I began thinking that the 'shape' of steampunk and Burning Man were similar and possibly related.

For Burning Man it is the ten principles[^28]: radical inclusion, gifting,

decommodification, self reliance, self expression, communal efforts, civic responsibility, leave no trace, participation, immediacy which characterize and create the space and time for week of creativity and community. With those values in mind, I began to wonder if music is considered, or experienced as too ethereal, too abstract, to be considered communal or immediate? This concept was in opposition to my own understanding that subjectively, music is more immediate, more profoundly affecting than the visual, but maybe this is not a shared perspective. This may be an instance where the contours of social culture are shaping, or shaped by our relationship to art. Both communities tend to collapse hierarchies in favor of democratic exchanges (of art and craft, of information, of responsibilities, of necessities). Is it possible that the hierarchy of musical performer vis a vis the audience member/listener is too unequal? Though many circus arts such as aerial silks, trapeze, stilt walkers, fire spinners, hula hoppers require a somewhat passive audience to observe an expert in their craft, this maybe understood as a differently weighted exchange. Is being part of a guerrilla street theater piece more interactive than dancing with a band as they perform? I leave that question open for consideration.

It does seems worth examining more closely that both of these communities, while they have much in difference, have so much overlap: the industrial Victoriana, the maker ethos, the value of self reliance, of inclusiveness and participation. It seems very meaningfully that large numbers of people (Burning Man 2009: pop 43,435; Steampunk World's Faire 2010: 3,000) are creating communities, creating art forms and interacting in these ways. Particularly in the ways of experience, performance, music, and visual arts.

The ways in which these forms model new methods of making meaning and solving issues, is a signal of positive changes which can be brought back into every day society from these smaller temporary societies. To that, it may be helpful to think of how the idiosyncrasies of these smaller societies are influenced and are influenced by the Community, mainstream society.

I would posit that the mediated nature of most of our communicative experiences and whole deprives us of something integral, an immediate, direct exchange in many interactions and that missing 'something' is satisfied in these spaces through the interactivity of the visual and sensory stimulation offered in radical participation focused events. For many, aural is the most intense most immediate, their first choice, experience but maybe there is something even more basic, more simple, a more deeply seeded desire that is not being tended to in the everyday lived of steampunkers and burners, and possibly each of us. Wherein the language of music, for a purpose other than dancing, trancing, meditating or the like, is too separate, or maybe fails to satiate the need for immediacy, for community for some burners or steampunks. Or at least on not in the same manner that is satisfied through the accent on visual, tangible culture. Possibly it is the strange visual serves to create a perimeter, a definitive time, place, moment for which steampunks and burners belong, a place which is theirs and which is whole. That seems to be consistent and cogent ideal of both of these phenomenon.

Another similarity worth noting is that unlike previous countercultures and some social identities, one doesn't necessarily have to 'wear the badge' of the tribe of the subculture or be an elite in the hierarchy, esoteric knowledge and minutiae are not the
currency of social capital in these spaces. It's a tribe, a society, of moment and experience, one needs not to dress in retrofuturist regalia or post-apocalyptic chic, but merely mentioning one's experience in Rock City or at Steamcon, the simple act of signaling one's interest and experience is 'enough is to indicate to others that you belong. You belong through participation.

This community of experiencers and makers is a refreshing change from the prêt-à-porter constantly changing, disposable consumer culture that the characterized the mid and early aughts. In contrast to the tween-centric mainstream culture, collections of people that dress and perform a time that never was (but should have been) and people who work through the winter and spring to create installations etc to bring into the middle of the desert for a week seemed can certainly be understood as an underground movement in comparison to the values of mainstream American culture. Another interesting synchrony I should point out that both Burning Man and steampunk developed around the same time – Burning Man and steampunk literature both came about in late 80's-90's- and both really came to prominence in the mid to late 2000's. There seem to be many social, political and particularly economic factors which I suspect influence the maturation of these phenomena separately and possibly their interrelationship.

**Firefly 2006**

It was at the New England Regional Burn event where I first participated in the inspiring experience that is the Firefly Collective Burn and where I became familiar with the maker and radical self-expression culture. I'd heard of Bread & Puppet and Burning

http://fireflyartscollective.org/
Man but, I never knew that such a local event existed until the band I was performing with was invited to participate. It was a fully immersing experience, we carried everything we would need for the next three days with us, we would be surrounded by people but miles away from the nearest town. It was a fresh place where there was never a dull moment and always someone willing or able to help. During the day there were theme camps to visit and experience, activities such as yoga and guerrilla performances as well as hiking and generally meeting new people. In the evening the forest turned into a multi-media, interactive space all its own. I had never seen this mashup of technology, creativity, resourcefulness, self-reliance such as this. It was like the M.I.T Media Lab, Mass Art and a Circus College all went into session in that space. It was a space to be your best. And expect the best from your camp neighbor. I was amazed with the art, the performances, the costumes, the installations and the positive energy of a community, that though it is temporary, is there for the benefit of all. This event truly “fostered a collaborative environment for participatory arts, encouraged people to express their creativity and challenge themselves to extend their concept of both community and art.”

Going to this event replenished my somewhat cynical opinion of the direction of culture at the time. When I came back from Firefly, I found it hard to adjust back to daily life as I’d been warned I would be. Somehow I felt as if I had been given a great gift but then had it taken away. The knowledge that people could still gather and create in this way was in valuable. I looked forward to a time when the environment, the experience, the ethos I was a part of in that Vermont farm would make its way back to the mainstream or at least bubble up from the underground and offer society something is was profoundly
Fieldnotes on Steampunk Events

Arisia 2009 was my first experience at a Con and in a full immersion fan event where I could meet, observe and experience steampunk in it's most autochthonous space. The band I was performing with had the privilege of being a performer for the Vampire Ball. Arisia is been going and growing since 1990 and is one of the larger sci-fi and fantasy fan conferences in the East coast and certainly in Boston. The event is four days long with nearly every hour of each day filled with events, speakers, films, gaming, panel discussions, activities.

The event was in 2009 and I had really only begun to think of Steampunk as an important cultural phenomenon the previous fall (2008). With that I had only discovered it around 2007, so to go to a fantasy conference with a Steampunk themed ball didn't seem so strange, it seemed rather on trend. But I wondered given the diversity of groups and interests (fans range from Anime & Cosplay enthusiasts, Sci-fi, Horror fans, Gamers) I was surprised at the amount of people who attended the Steampunk Ball (approximately 700-900 people) and that they were all in Steampunk attire. As I mentioned, steampunk was an emerging movement at this time, so one couldn't simply order a mad scientist, or dystopian explorer or turn of the century time traveler outfit from the internet. The vast majority of those in the room were wearing hand made, well-detailed, era appropriate and thematically imaginative dress. (I was one of the few who was not steampunk dress having just performed at the Vampire Ball.) At this point I realized that steampunk wasn't missing.
merely a niche aesthetic but a cultural form that is hand made, vibrantly social and something to be experienced and shared.

This feeling was solidified by the dancing. The event was not planned to be a ball in the modern sense where people dress up, a band plays and maybe there are some refreshment. There was a live band on a stage with a leader, an impresario of sorts, who was teaching this roomful of costumed people how to do contras, quadrilles and reels. What was truly remarkable is that this room full of people, mostly strangers lined up, followed the instructor, got confused, guided and corrected each other and learned to dance together. In an area were so many of our daily and personal iterations are mediated by electronic devices and other media this example of a large group coming together, learning, communicating, touching and experiencing others in such an authentic, unmediated way was truly remarkable to me. This experience made me think of this aesthetic movement as something more of a cultural phenomenon and as a community where people make, learn, share, express in an authentic, sincere way. Of course there is a caveat being that everyone is in some type of costume, sometimes in character and in something of a liminal fantasy space.)

It seemed like something of a breakthrough, like the clearing of a haze. Being in a large room full of people, of strangers, learning something new together, making mistakes together, dancing together, interacting, sweating in their costumes together This at a time when mainstream (magazines) were decrying technology and our dependance on it for social iterations and information gathering and blaming it for a deterioration
social skills\textsuperscript{31} of the fabric of society\textsuperscript{32}, it was remarkable to observe this joyful expression. It was a refreshing change from the ironic detachment and insouciance which has been the favored posture of cool for sometime. This socio-cultural interaction exuded the warmth and curiosity which I would learn comes to characterize Steampunk and influenced me to look beyond the design and decoration – though it is important-- and think about this phenomenon less like an engine of individual components, but to see it as a mechanism capable of energy and motion. This was embodies by dancing together, making together. In a way the participants were weaving together the threads of our perspectives to create a fabric of time and place, something shared but distinct from other environments.

Since I was performing and preparing most of the day I only had the chance to walk around a bit and talk with a couple of people. Though the nature of such an event is to drink in the energy and connectedness of the communities. Again, it was refreshing to be in a space where pluralism of unique type of diversity of interest and specialty were blending together not into a monochromatic blur, but more like separate strokes which looked at from an outsiders perspective created a vivid and visually stunning landscape.

Another notable aspect was the presence of steampunk at the con: in the panel discussions, a steampunk themed murder mystery, several vendors and demonstrations about how to create a steampunk costume, the Steampunk Ball which was held in the larger ballroom and a steampunker won for best costume of the entire con. This presence of steampunk was up noticeably from the year before. Although I was not in attendance at

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Arisia 2008, a search of the events yields only one discussion event for steampunk. Ninjas and pirates seemed to be the novelty theme the year before. But I can't speak of the presence on an emergent or underlying way.) It should be noted that steampunk kept it's influence in the 2010 Arisia by way of art contest, Steampunk tea and several discussion panels. I gathered from this that steampunk has found a place in the con culture and I suspect will develop more ways of gathering, communicating and making meaning through the guise of retrofuturism and gaslight romance.

The Interviews

The fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics were invaluable in getting my mind around the concepts necessary to understand the emerging culture of steampunk, its practitioners, its productions, its cultural texts and to allow my instinct and experience to inform my understanding of how the phenomenon would and could develop. (e.g. Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger) While I am novice in this field, this approach and grounded theory methodology deeply influenced me in the means of gathering evidence, in developing observations, in the formulations of my hypothesis. Phenomenological methodology the hermeneutic lens gave me the tools, perspective and ability to perceive the nuance, finesse and curvature of this evolving world of steampunk.

The interviews were gathered with grounded theory in mind. The interviews were conducted with individuals who I knew. After careful consideration I realized that it was to the benefit of the work to speak with people with who I had a rapport and who would feel comfortable being candid with me or to disagree. This relationship or prior
knowledge would allow them to feel comfortable sharing, synthesizing and ruminating and would allow me to gather information and fold in my prior acquaintance of each interviewee into my analysis and trust that the experience would be enjoyable and beneficial to all.

Each person I selected to interview not only accepted the invitation but was enormously generous with their time, their insights and their good humor. The four interviewees has particular qualities that I wanted to learn more about in relationship to steampunk and also held different perspectives -from my own and each other. I believed that choice would give the piece a bit more balance.

**Meeting & Musing with Bruce and Melanie Rosenbaum of ModVic:**

“Steampunk is a design solution.” - Bruce Rosenbaum

Bruce and I met at a planning meeting for the Charles River Museum of Industry & Innovation Steampunk Festival in 2010; I was a volunteer and he a participant. When I realized that the friendly person who I was seated next to and chatting with was the creator of the Steampunk House and President of ModVic, it felt a bit like a celebrity sighting. I’d come across images of the Steampunk House the previous year and had fallen in love with everything about it: the approach and the aesthetics, particularly the charm and attention to detail. While Bruce and I were in the planning meeting I got a sense of his philosophy and genuine excitement about the steampunk and steam-design through his contributions to the conversation. Particularly the importance of form and function, creativity and fun, reuse, restoration and re-imagining. From a brief conversation I got the impression that he wasn't just a tinkerer but a designer in the sense
of one who solves problems beautifully. His attention to usability and user experience were sharp and a fascinating compliment to the refurbish, restore approach which can often have an air of the look-but-don't-touch to it.

When I put in a request for an interview with Bruce and Melanie Rosenbaum of ModVic they not only graciously accepted but extended an invitation to their home, the one and only Steampunk House. Victorian house which is their as well as the site of their design and restoration business ModVic. Bruce and Melanie are speculative fiction design entrepreneurs who specialize in re-imagining Victorian era homes for a modern living. As student of steampunk I had seen many, many images and articles of the Steampunk House on blogs, webfeatures, other write-ups etc., so the idea of actually stepping foot into the space was thrilling. Upon my arrival my expectations were exceeded, I found a beautiful, elegant, well-designed and genuinely welcoming space.

The mission of ModVic is to combine the best of both worlds of Victorian high design and craftsmanship with modern functionality and usefulness. And the synthesis of those objectives is achieved in their home. Nothing seems fanciful thrown together, nor is anything is cleverly juxtaposed for a dramatic effect. It's fun without making fun of itself and the fun, the joy seems to come from the pleasure of repurposing and making something well made and beautiful.

For all intents and purposes Bruce and Melanie are the first family of steampunk home design and call the Steampunk House their home. Besides the fact that they live only a short distance from Boston, I found the mission behind ModVic the be a breathing

33 http://steampunkworkshop.com/visit-steampunked-home
example of the most salient aspects of steampunk: form, function, innovation, positive experience, and creative problem solving.

The idea for the design and renovation, reconstruction company came to them after they renovated their own late Victorian home. The idea came from all the skills they gained, enjoyment they found and craftspeople and other artisans they came across, as they restored and re-imagined their home. Because of their success with their own house, they decided to take a stab at the design market and do what they do best. “In any business you’ve got to find your niche, and this is ours.” Bruce said. Many people and firms do historical restoration, but the salvaging, restoring, reusing and re-imagining is unique to Bruce and Melanie's approach.

The name of the design company, ModVic, a contraction of the words Modern and Victorian and the name says it all. They take Victorian-era homes and restore them while incorporating contemporary technologies and comforts of modern living, all while seamlessly integrating these modern amenities with the innate beauty of older buildings. Their specialty is not limited to architecture but to furnishings. The approach is to the honor the craftsmanship and beauty of the period and piece, usually by recycling and refurbishing pieces and then adapting them for modern uses. (Photo workstation.)

The idea of breathing new life into these old pieces, at times respecting their former beauty and other times reusing and upcycling them for modern life, can be considered symbol of alternate history making as much as it is an example of the retrofuturistic aesthetic. Bruce explained to me, “These pieces are created with the idea of what would the information age have been like if it occurred during the Victorian [and
Craftsman] era”. With that framework, the speculative and creative possibilities are vast, though not endless. From my vantage point as a student of the community and its forms, that is a vibrant example of how steampunk is an aesthetic, as well as a verb; it's an activity which creates a sensory experience; steampunk is not only result, but intent.

The ambience of the house can't be understated. It is very welcoming, beautiful, well-decorated but not overstuffed, as per the prototypical Victorian parlor, and has everything one could ask for in a comfortable, contemporary home. This is not an effort at historic accuracy or an exercise merely to satisfy a purist's desire. This home is a particular space of expression where one can experience the coalescing of two concepts into a unique third. It's the best parts of a bygone era, blended with the comforts and advancements of the present day; it's that combination of complimentary elements which creates a sensory overtone, a kind of formant or a 'third voice'. Melanie said it best, “If I feel anxious [about a piece] with my grand-nieces or the dogs running around it, then we need to think of another approach” because livability is a priority. “We like that everything in the house has a story, which is a very Victorian idea. Families would have curiosities and conversation pieces in their parlor to entertain guests and themselves.”

The Steampunk House is full of curiosities and stories which they share with many communities. Bruce and Melanie often open their home to the public as part of the Historic Home Tours to raise funds for the Sharon Historical Society, as I was enjoying my personal tour Bruce remarked that some who visit their home comment it is like a museum because of all the period pieces. The appearance of the stove or may bring the

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36 The third voice is psychoacoustic effect in which a listener hears an audible pitch that is higher than, and different from, the by a small group of singers. It is created by the interactions of the upper partial tones in each singer's note (and by sum and difference frequencies created by nonlinear interactions within the ear.

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visitor back to a bygone era, but the function is primary importance and how well it meets the needs of a contemporary. Although the home was built in 1901, this is not *1900 House*[^37]. This is a home that is meant to be lived in and enjoyed as an example to interested history buffs, steampunk enthusiasts and potential design clients/collaborators. To that end his is historically inaccurate in some ways. Inaccurate only in terms how a piece functions presently as opposed to what it was originally intended for (e.g. the mantle piece and stove which are part of the entertainment system) but when restoration is the task historical accuracy, though the piece may be slightly repurposed, is a matter of integrity. The way the rooms are used is a repurposing of sorts, particularly in regards to the kitchen. At the turn of the last century kitchens were small, cramped, hot and generally not places where family or guest would socialize. However, at Steampunk House, the hearth is truly the heart of this home. It's also where the most renovations, refurbishing and repurposing happened. The Victorian era Erickson cooking stove that has been fitted with a hi-end electric Miele halogen cooktop; the antique printer's bench topped with engineered quartz stone which is 'kitchen island' area, and early 20th century cash register which now dispenses dog treats.

One of the most interesting parts of speaking with Bruce and taking a tour of the home was discussing process and how a historical piece can find it's way into their home with no clear purpose for them, but in a short period of time, the piece becomes part of a design or restoration project for a client. Or how while finding pieces that just look appealing or are interesting, Bruce and Melanie foster relationships with other people among communities of artisans, rebuilders and victorian re-imaginists or historians who

[^37]: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/1900house/
can tell them about the origins and original purposes of certain pieces. This networking seems particularly salient to the community of steampunk; while tinkering and design may be done on one's own, the information gathering and large scale projects that tend to occur in steampunk, the tinkerer and maker communities force us to ask things of others in a way which we don't typically do in ordinary life. In away, it's being subversive by being more interdependent. Bruce discusses Janusian thinking which is best described as “bringing two opposites together in your mind, holding them there together at the same time, considering their relationships, similarities, pros and cons, and interplay, then creating something new and useful”38. It's about overcoming paradoxes by forming creative, elegant solutions. We discuss how elegance and usefulness are so important to our personal spaces and even in the everyday items we use. Melanie takes from the drawer a can opener, the type which is very ergonomic and forms well to the hand and opens the can in a way that doesn't create a serrated edge which can be dangerous when there are pets, animals anyone in a hurry around. There is a very real value implicit in fixing things that don't work or cause unnecessary issues. By correcting those issues or removing those issues, we make life more pleasant, even in just a small way. It's significant that we have the power to change things in our environment, to think through problems and develop creative solutions. We discuss, what I call the grace, of tools that work properly and add a level of ease and efficiency to life. Solving problems and creating beauty together is a meaningful act. The ways in which the Steampunk House does this, for example, out of pieces long since forgotten disregarded and thrown away pieces separated by time and space, by miles and years and synthesizing them with

38 http://www.janusthinking.com/2009/03/janusian-thinking/
modern objects and spaces stands as something remarkable. They combine their ideas and found objects with the skills of an imaginative team of craftspeople, wherein these pieces can come together to make a cohesive, personalized, welcoming, comfortable home.

What is clearly apparent is that Bruce and Melanie are as lovely, comforting and unassumingly elegant as the spaces they create. We began a conversation about the origins of steampunk in literature and the tinkerer craft culture as well as the interest that folks have in 'seeing the moving parts' of the things we use everyday. We spoke a bit on the elements of design and philosophy of aesthetics to illuminate what informs their work. It seems fair to say that Bruce and Melanie have found their niche and have the skill set to really excel in this form. But I can't help but feel the influences of that fates as well as the muses.

Skill and effort are theirs for sure but it must have been more than a little bit of luck that brought a 90 year old meat tenderizer or a battleship telephone to their door. Many of the piece that are so integral to the home 'almost didn't happen' or were just seemed to come their way were influenced a bit by the fates as well. That fortuitousness lends itself to the idea of the that good energy and general positivity follow where there is reuse and creative problem solving. The spark that fuels the fire of creativity and innovation is very much fanned by good fortune, like the synergy of a scientist in the laboratory, an explorer making discovery in the field or more fancifully the adventures of a sky pirate. Though it's my opinion that people to an extent, make their own luck. By being a kind creative one can weave together people, objects, ideas and even time, in a sense to create positive spaces and functional items.
Bruce mentioned that one of the concepts in Feng shui is that an object should bring beauty or function to a space and though I’m not very well versed in the Feng shui design approach, it does seem to me that when a piece has both excellent form as well as function that combination could contribute to the positive movement of energy in a space, or at least free up space by not requiring as many objects. Just a thought. By spending a bit of time with Bruce and Melanie in their home, I got the impression that they fostered the flow of positivity by taking care of old, forgotten things, finding the right people, artisans or other collaborators to help them achieve their ideas. The people who could finish the phrase, “what if we did this...”

The families first foray into the world of steampunk may have been Bruce’s purchase of a 'time machine' and their interest in historical renovation may have arisen from the experience with their own home, but one has to ask, is there a market? “Many people with older homes want the elegance of them, but often have a taste for the high tech, yet are faced with the challenge of melding those things and desire to do so seamlessly.” That is where the business comes in: ModVic solves problems of anachronism by re-imagining the past and present into the present-future. At first we didn't know what we were doing had a name, explains Melanie They were just doing what they loved, what seemed like an interesting home decorating approach and they found this whole community. We agree that the steampunk community is a very enthusiastic bunch and that the energy is certainly a reason for its growth over the past several years and bodes well for the longevity of the community.

For ModVic the purpose is not to create a piece just to be unusual or just to be
decorative but to make people feel comfortable, to feel welcome. I suggest that hospitality is a very meaningful way of building community. In my studies of peace building, I was introduced to the idea that hospitality is the first step to developing relationship between communities, groups and individuals in conflict. For example, if you can make a person feel comfortable, invited, welcome, safe, then one can begin a meaningful exchange necessary for transforming ideas, positions and create healing relationships. If this approach is effective in hostile spaces, I suspect the that the diverse, sometimes socially shy folks who are drawn to steampunk may appreciate that quality and embody it in their forms and their interactions.

The topic of how generally well-behaved and good mannered steampunks and the events tend to be. We agree that there is always an exception to the rule but feel the rule is more relevant. The reason for the good-naturedness we surmise is an adaptation of Victorian etiquette and propriety, but with a catch. While the idea of Victorian in manners may sound not affected or pretensions, it's adapted in to be very personable and respectful and incorporate contemporary, progressive thought, particularly when it comes to ideas about class and women. This is a great example of form and function, symbolism working as an agent of change. Flows of social capital seem to work differently within steampunk as opposed to other social groups. There is a collapse expected of the hierarchies (artists, academics versus audiences and ordinary attendees) in favor of bottom up definitions. The benefits of having a more flat, more democratic structure seems worth holding on to as a paradigm in the ordinary world. Another way this shows up is that capital or the cool factor at these events is not based on acumen of some
obscure or ephemeral topic or the amount of money one expends on a project or to deck themselves out: it's based on how cool and creative your piece (of wearable art, of industrial sculpture is) and on your abilities as a tinkerer. This mode of interacting seems much more practical and well-suited to this situation This observation was confirmed by Bruce and Melanie From their experience at a variety of steampunk events, everyone, maker or audience member, is genuinely nice to each other and sincerely interested with each others inventions and creations. People who create these magnificent pieces are humbled by compliments and return them. It was a very circular feeling, Melanie commented.

The Victorian era is noted for particularly rigid and demeaning categories and rules for women, people of color, and the working class. However in a contemporary setting that point of view would be considered intolerant and generally unacceptable. It's fair to say that in that certain Victorian behavior would not be appreciated by most participants, and moreover, sexism or classism would be self-defeating to the community. Blue collar work is the backbone of steampunk, of tinkers & hacks and the aesthetics contribution in the way of media design and craft are at the very least evenly split with women. So the idea of the Victorian gentleman or public versus private spheres of work are This is a situation where some tinkering and steampunking is necessary to make a present or a future past more egalitarian and accepting of any individual who is interested and able.

At this point in the conversation I put forth my opinion that steampunk is a different 'shape' than other subcultures or counter cultures that have occurred previously.
I suggest that steampunk is defined by a collapsed hierarchy in terms of where fashion, ideas, forms and definitions of the community come from. That it has grown laterally rather than vertically insofar that the concepts of aesthetic have been decided, that they have been created in a grassroots way instead of an avant guard way. Bruce seems to agree with that and also adds that steampunk has no static definition and that definition isn't coming from a mysterious source, but is developed by the steampunk community who decide how much Victoriana, how much Art Deco, how much Science Fiction and how much post apocalypse is represented and folded into the aesthetics and philosophy. For example Steampunk Magazine held a one month discussion forum on what is steampunk; this was less an attempt to 'define' steampunk and more a place to collect the diverse working definitions from individuals and see what is on the collective mind in terms of how people think about the genre, community, aesthetic, ethos and phenomenon in general.

Bruce surmised, “Steampunking is about community and communication: you can't do something of such a large scale without meeting people, problem solving and thinking creatively.” That goes for a renovation project an industrial art pieces or deciding what themes or criteria are even in the discussion.

He is sensitive to the accusation that he is a hack, not in the sense of not being skilled or experienced, but in the sense of cutting up a piece and melding it with contemporary technology in what some have called an abomination. But Bruce has a code of ethics in regards to old and salvaged goods. He only repurposed items which are truly in need of a second life, in other words if they are really in terrible shape and
wouldn't be bothered with by a collector, museum or another person who would find value in the pieces, those are the objects which become reused in creative ways. Some objects come to them fully intact, but Bruce still finds a unique way to repurpose them, with a little work he can revive long forgotten pieces to their aesthetic, but not functionally glory. That is why he will find a new function for that object, (e.g the Brownie camera workstation) but make sure that all the pieces it originally came with are incorporated in the new creation. His thinking is that, if another maker, refurbisher, maker, inventor comes across his piece in the future, they will have all the pieces, to either restore it for its original purpose or imagine and create a whole new 'life' for this piece.

The symbolic power of solving 'problems' elegantly creatively and beautifully is a very powerful thing, when we see things as a binary or unsolvable, in a way they are. We can't be what we can't see, in some ways. Yet, when we can make something we have work more smoothly or in away that is more helpful, that small transformation from strife to grace can be repeated on a large scale. This philosophy of refurbishing as tantamount to giving new life to an object can be a very powerful world view in the way that it makes it possible for someone to either use for it's original purpose, for a repurpose, or a purpose all of its own. This, to me is incredibly forward thinking and signals a long term approach that is intelligent, ecologically sound and addresses issues of patrimony with the reality that resources should be seen as just that, not refuse. Divergent thinking, innovative and imaginative designs with elegant approaches, steampunk really is a design solution.
This is Bruce in the kitchen of the Steampunk House pictured with the refurbished stove and the craftsman inspired fire-back complete with the back-lit salvaged stained glass windows. (left)

This is an antique printer's bench topped with engineered quartz stone and an added pedestal from a girls' school near Boston and used it to extend the bench. (The pedestal stores food for the family's Samoyeds.) (left)

This is Bruce's - fully functional- Victorian Organ Command Desk which he created from bits and pieces of Victorian detritus that he had a 19th century pump organ. Everything is either an authentic Victorian antiques, a period reproductions, or an otherwise salvaged items. (left)
“The ophthalmometer Computer Workstation is a sculpted unification of an original F.A. Hardey & Company’s C.I. Ophthalmometer, life-size polished aluminum Dental Phantom Mannequin Head and a 1800s Hammond Multiplex Typewriter all transformed and fused into a modern computer workstation. The computer workstation features a foot pedal driven dental drill rescued from the 1800s, with a cast iron base drawing table and a pull out drawer on an adjustable arm. The workstation features a Mac mini and a Dell 15-inch monitor framed in custom wood with Apple Magic Mouse and typewriter carved keyboard as peripherals, Webcam of the computer workstation is a LifeCam Cinema while a 1800s Victorian doll eye sits a top the monitor for the complete look.”

(http://www.steampunkworkshop.com/more-steampunkery-modvic)

Here is the Erickson Stoves and has been modified with a Miele halogen cooktops the with electric ovens have been fit into the body of the stove as well. The water heater has been converted to a filter to provide fresh water for cooking and for the pets!
Interview with V. Nigel Taylor from Platform One

Nigel Taylor is the founding member and vocalist for the Steampunk friendly synthpop band Platform One. I'd like to disclose that I've known Nigel for several years, so the illusion of interviewer's objectivity is blown. However it's the subjective, qualitative nature of our relationship which inspired me to ask him for his thoughts and contributions on the genre, phenomena, community of steampunk. A little background, we've connected through mutual creative interests and mutual friends. Creatively our bands have shared a stage together and personally we have many of dear friends in common and often find ourselves in the same spaces for events and celebration. I've known him to be insightful, intelligent, talented and very sincere. When it occurred to me that my work would benefit from some formal conversations with folks in and around the steampunk community, Nigel seemed like a perfect choice. He's been a musician, performer, dark alternative culture contributor and participant for more years than he'd probably like me to say, for the sake of transparency over 15. I thought that Nigel's insight into the unique qualities of the steampunk community would be invaluable as he has experienced many a fashion trend, fad, and evolution of the dark alternative culture. Platform One being featured performers at steampunk events over the past years. (Steampunk Convention, San Jose, CA 2008,
We began the conversation (via phone) discussing the music industry and the state it finds itself in – gasping for air- and how it has brought it unto itself. Mostly record companies dismissal of A&R representatives and the lack of investment in talent development. At first I was concerned we were going to veer too far off topic, but I wanted to let the conversation warm up naturally and as luck would have it the business oriented prologue flowed nicely into an observation of the music industry and cultural climate which, I believed affected the progression of steampunk: niche versus collectivity.

“In the early to mid aughts musically, it seemed, sub-genre was more important than sound; what you called yourself was more important than what the music sounded like. The more obscure and niche, the better. How bands presented themselves (through media, PR, aesthetic look, physical presentation) was the defining characteristic of genre.”

This seemed to be the case in terms of what music seemed misnamed at best and derivative at worst. Many times when I would ask a fan of a genre or band to describe what characteristics were at its core and quite often I wouldn't descriptions of feelings or metaphors using the visual. I found it very interesting, but didn't know what to make of the response, nor was I any clearer on the qualities of the music that people were using as a rubric. Music should make you feel, of course. And many people engage with music in a purely emotional, non-intellectual way. Yet when music is described (or experienced) as a certain feeling evoking a time or place, it seems to be a bit to ethereal to qualify as a
genre, or movement or the like. Or maybe it is a new way of listeners categorizing music?

Nigel goes on and while still speaking in general terms, applies the general observation to the specific issue goth/dark alternative genres. “People [bands] began describing themselves in narrower and narrower terms. Splitting off into sub-sub-genres. But eventually we [alternative/dark alternative bands] bled ourselves dry and the [smaller] scenes (e.g. eletroclash, downtempo, dethrock) faded away and the larger community [goth/industrial] really fell apart in some ways”.

When I bring up the fact that many subcultures and music genres are defined by mood or a look, particularly goth or punk, Nigel agrees but supports his point: “Goth, punk, industrial stemmed from music first. Sure, Malcolm McLaren [the impresario who formed the Sex Pistols] was interested in fashion (via his girlfriend Vivienne Westwood who shaped and defined punk fashion through her boutiques and is responsible for bringing the look to the mainstream) but it was an image went along with the sound.” At the very least it was an image motivated by a mood of rebellion or withdrawal, crystallized to many by a sound and sonic form.

Which brings us to one of the unique and divergent facts of steampunk, music is not an essential part or a defining medium of steampunk. There are bands who define as steampunk, but the characteristics of what a steampunk band is or what it sounds like are still very unclear, and unimportant. Steampunk music as it stands now is probably best understood as an eclectic amalgam of genres, influences, time periods and bands. While many bands may wear steampunk style clothing and use retrofuturistic themes in their songs or videos, what steampunk music is as definitive form is still up for discussion. If
not music then where if steampunk’s “Steampunk really seems to be rooted in the
literature. I made the point that Gothic literature has definitely had an influence on the
goth community via aesthetics, mood archetypes, of dark alternative communities and
genres. But Nigel underscores that both punk and goth subcultures, as we understand
them, were first and foremost born from a sound.

The role of music in steampunk culture and events is somewhat slippery. It is
certainly not a primary or even secondarily important aspect of the culture: it's a distant
third and more like a mosaic of sub-genres best thought of as steampunk friendly. The
music can be weird and eclectic, but that mirrors the diversity of the participants. We both
agree that the community is still deciding what steampunk sounds like even though
several bands have claimed the title of steampunk bands or been called the sweethearts of
steampunk. Like the literary genre, the musical will be defined by those who love it not
necessarily those who create it.

Platform One are an electronic band best described as new romantic synth pop
with a contemporary feel. If one thinks of steampunk music as ever evolving and
potentially including almost anything the steampunk community itself decided it likes,
then it makes sense why Platform One was selected to play. But in reality, when the
performers vary from Neo-Victorian themed, Neo-Vaudevillians, Belle Epoque and
Speakeasy enthusiasts or bands regaled in steampunk wearable art and stage design, then
one begins to wonder, am I sure I'm in the right place? When I asked Nigel how they
were received his response was 'very well' though the first day they were at the con,
literally no one knew who they were. But the second night at the con, after they played,
they were warmly accepted into the group as fellow fans and respected as performers. I asked how the rest of the band felt about playing at steampunk events, “The band was a little skeptical and didn't want to jump on a fad but from my perspective the fad jumped on us.” Their approach was to enjoy the event and be part of it. Like every performer, I imagine, the band is just pleased to be asked to music they love and to entertain people.

I inquire why the hesitation around sub-genre and fads. We talked more about the whiplash quick micro-trends of the early to mid-aughts that spun through fashion and music in general and the dark alternative community in particular. Specifically the example of the electroclash. Nigel lists some of the reasons why he believes that genre was so short lived. “In all honesty, it flopped. It came up out of no where, very quickly. It was based on reviving an obscure genre from a years ago that wasn't that popular to begin with. It never felt that well thought out to me. Plus, there was a smarminess to it. It was too specific.” I agreed, with his observation, particularly the comment about smarminess. There was something about the genre and the music, which I did enjoy, that felt somehow exclusive or superior and smug. We spent a little time trying to dissect the term and whether it was the most accurate way to articulate that sense, while out thoughts on the topic were amusing they proved to be particularly fruitful we agreed to let it stand as opinion rather than objective fact and moved on.

As a side note, electroclash is a sub-classification of synthpop, which is the category Nigel's band best fits into hence the specific example A cultural description electroclash is classification of some songs, by some artists that some people liked in the realm of alternative and electronic dance. There were few artists who specialized in this
or kept with it over the years. It was the genre to know about in the alternative dance clubs and other culturally savvy circles.

One thing did strike me in what Nigel said, that electroclash was an older, only moderately popular genre. When I suggest that steampunk too could be seen as the revisiting of an obscure genre that wasn't extremely popular, Nigel brings up that “steampunk is much, much more diverse [than many of the micro-genres of the early to mid aughts] and it makes something.”

The conversation moved to the climate of the cons and what characteristics were the most pronounced, to which he immediately replied: The clothes! People have a different outfit for each day of the con, which typically run for 3-4 days, as well as evening wear. Each outfit was a work of hand made art unto itself. We really can't overstate the place fashion, and handcrafted, bespoken fashion in steampunk.

This is where the conversation turns to the role of the artisans, crafters and tinkerers in steampunk. “In steampunk, artists [the designers, crafters, artists who make wearable art of all kinds] are doing it real well, and the people who are really, really good, are rising to the top and getting the credit they deserve.” In the sense that people are buying their wares and being commissioned for pieces and on average being able to eek out a living. We agree that is something that doesn't happen all the time and certainly not as often as it should; many times artists or performers will become very successful while some folks in the community wonder why artist X is successful and not artist A, B, C, or D? Often the answer is simply that artist X was doing the right thing at the right time and the right people noticed. I interpret this success as a symbol of steampunk's
unique 'shape' insofar as it shows that quality is valued and is judged by the community and by pleased patrons, not by a cultural curator.

Nigel agrees, to some extent, that steampunk is created from the bottom up, at the very least we agree that one of steampunks essential, and probably one of its core elements is the way people choose to dress, the way that people imagine, re-imagine and express themselves through dress. “Steampunk is also a way to re-imagine your closet. Many people have acquired a collection of historical or futuristic pieced and accoutrements over the years in the dark art and underground club community. It's a way that you can be true to yourself. You don't have to buy or even make something just to look [like part of the community]. You can be true to yourself, you can re-imagine yourself.” That so me said it everything I was thinking and have tried to get across in this piece, that this group of cultural expressions is really a positive, progressive way of making sense of one's self in relationship to the world around them. Whether they re-make, re-imagine themselves or the world they wish to be in, or to an express a part of themselves that they hope to be in accepting surroundings, this phenomenon is very much about taking inventory (whether emotionally, sociopolitically, or sartorially) assessing problems, creating intelligent, elegant solutions.

Eventually the conversation the origins of steampunk or what the culture most closely resembles. Nigel's response is that steampunk (as it presents in the fan/comic-con culture) is closest to the cosplay and anime fan culture. We begin to deconstruct that question why that is: the visual elements, the costumes, the movies, the characters (either created or affected and embodied). The way media defines the culture and seems to be
the most tangible aspect and reference point of the community are also why. Nigel offers another observation, “Steampunk is ageless”. You see 60 year-old tinkerer guys in top hats and spats, 10 year-olds with modified contraptions and ray guns, 30 year-old couples in full retro futurist dress with steampunked strollers all mingling and enjoying the events.

He goes on to reflect that the energy at the several steampunk events the band has played have been upbeat, and welcoming. This is a space were everyone is accepted and respected even more so if you participate, in even the smallest way: at pair of goggles, a top hat or corset. Any effort made to contribute to the positive energy of the con (or general steampunk event) and you are treated equally. (It should be noted that plainclothes are welcome too. Appropriate dress is encouraged, but not expected but respectful interest is.)

The other difference Nigel commented on It's not nearly as hierarchical or competitive as other subcultures can be. “It's a positive place to be. When people put in the effort and dress fancy they feel good and it creates a good energy. That is part of why it's a positive movement. It's a [form] that has no limits. As long as you have elements of Victorian-Edwardian, or some sort of creative uses of technology, innovation and imagination. People are very accepting of those who want to push the boundaries “ He gives the example off the top of his head of a “steampunk geisha”. “Say if you wanted to be a steampunk geisha, at first it doesn't make sense. But, if you did it well and came up with a delightful backstory, it would be a hit.”

The conversation turned to my core interest: Why steampunk? Why now?
“Everything has it's time.” While I had my own hypotheses and motives, Nigel wisely pointed out that this, whatever it 'is' has been around for the better part of twenty years. It's been a slow boil in movies and other media, entertainment and art. “There is no denying it, it's here”. There is something very cool about the mixing of technology and the victorian era. There is something in pop culture that loves the re-imaging of history, of literature with the absurd. Abe Lincoln the Vampire hunter. etc. Maybe it's because of that complexity, the beauty, the infinite combinations of history, literature and the contemporary imagination there is so much vibrance and diversity at events. With those very fertile grounds of the past, present future possible, the community could go strong for quite a long time. I add that since so many kids are being brought to this community by their parents or sibling through cons and through steampunk Yong adult literature. I propose that there will several strong waves of steampunks because the 8-14 year old demographic will have this in their cultural palette and will revive or recycle steampunk in a way that fits them.

One of my assertions is that steampunk is the antidote to irony; it may be made up but it is truly, honestly, good-naturedly sincere. I held that until I heard of Professor Elemental, performer and steam punker favorite who has invented the genre of pith-hop. Pith as in pith helmet which is often worn by 20th century explorers and hence, steampunks and hop as in hip-hop. So in a manner of speaking Professor Elemental is a steampunk hip hop artist. This is when I thought steampunk may be spreading itself too thin. A man in a pith helmet, British accent, rapping about tea and other Victorian tropes, I thought some we may be beginning down a path of self-referential humor and smug self
deprecation. Yes, it is ridiculous, but entertaining and well done; several qualities of steampunk. I broached this with Nigel to see if he had an opinion or insight. He had met and performed with the Professor and offered a helpful interpretation, “Think of him as a steampunk Voltaire.” (Both the Enlightenment era writer and the contemporary musician.) Where I sensed irony or mocking was upon further reflection simple absurdity and satire.

Nigel went on to contemplate,” If goth were emerging now what would it look like? Would it be steampunk? I'm not sure.” We agree that both cultures are very different while members of each would find something in common with the other. It's often said that steampunk is just goths in brown, however I believe that platitude is a bit broad. While much of the bohemian, quirky, romanticism and creativity that was part of the goth culture finds it's way back to the surface via steampunk, the particular way that the community expresses itself, manifests its cultural forms and synthesizes so many niches, genres and groups is particularly interesting.

When I again brought up question of whether he thought one thing brought about the rise of steampunk, Nigel's reply was savvy. “There really isn't one specific catalyst. It's been in Japanese media for so long, it's been in our cinema for so long. It's been on a slow boil for the past 20 years or so. A slow rise should mean a slow fall. Right now, as a subculture, steampunk is out and proud!” Internet media, art, craft movies, books. It [steampunk] has a way of subtly sneaking into things aesthetically (e.g. Serenity 2005, Firefly (2002)).

“There are small signals in mainstream culture that geek is good; weirdness is
accepted.” Not in the awkward, ironic, geek chic exoticism where the stereotype is
glamorized but the actual individuals of said group are marginalized as in the early
2000's. We speculate that we maybe entering a time where it's ok to act different, look
different and think different. A change which I believe is essential in order to deal with
many of the socio-political, economic and ecological problems we face. The world needs
solutions, creative, elegant solutions.

We discuss the social dynamic of steampunk; people are generally really nice
friendly and polite. We decide that it's a product of the 'origin' communities: Neo-
Victorians, the Renaissance Faire crowd for whom manners and chivalry are part of the
world they want to create and live in when they go to a con or a LARP or now a
steampunk event, those values come with them. I also posit that the space to freely
express themselves and a supportive environment brings out the best in people. It truly
seems that the people who participate in steampunk are interested in creating, and re-
imagining a world which they want to live in and on some level wish exists, and by
remaking and inventing can be brought about.

**Interview with Holly Brewer of HUMANWINE**

I had that opportunity to speak with Holly Brewer the singer, songwriter and “mom” of HUMANWINE, a band which
defies definition and genre but has been chosen by the steampunk community as one of their own. The band is known
for unique instrumentation, their ability to electrify and inspire
audiences with metaphor, a mastery of soundscapes, the alternate world of VINLAND where many of its songs take place and their survivalist politics. They have been embraced and exalted by the steampunk community which seems to be a comfortable, if at times imperfect fit for them.

HUMANWINE is a Boston-based band formed in 2002 by Holly and M@ who continue to be the core members of a rotating, ever evolving line-up. The first time I heard of the band was in 2004 then saw them perform in 2005. Later that year my band played at a show with them, but I didn't have the chance to get to know the band members personally. Over the years that followed HUMANWINE have been very successful despite –or because of- their post-genre qualities. Performing with folk, bluegrass, dark alternative, cabaret, circus, punk, metal and rock bands, they have had critical, national and local success without compromising their values as anti-corporation, independent artists.

The band moved to the west coast for a few years, it was around the time I noticed being featured steampunk oriented media (podcasts, blogs, articles) and at steampunk events, I was thrilled to see a local band, one I respected, doing well. It was good to see such a distinctive band being associated with a burgeoning, emerging community with a complimentary ethos.

As there is effectively no genre or agreed upon definition of what is steampunk music, I've come to think of HUMANWINE as maker rock. They modify their own
instruments. They live sustainably, or as much as reasonable within a metropolitan area; they've developed their own water filtration system; they've converted an old school bus into a tour bus, their home away from home, to run on biodiesel. And at the time of the interview, Holly was eagerly anticipating the arrival of the solar panel and converter purchased for a mere $100. This small addition to the artillery brings them a lot closer to their goal of sustainability. With this one solar panel they could power all the necessary devices a bare essential level and reduce their dependance on the grid their carbon footprint: Holly and M@ truly live what they sing about.

I was surprised that Holly accepted my interview request and was honored by how very generous she was with her time as well as incredibly candid, insightful and easy to talk to on a range of topics. There are many 'steampunk bands' and of those there are bands who really claim and revel in the title but HUMANWINE doesn't wear a crown of gears over a clockwork court: they are a band with a message, a love of music and one that mixes happily with an eclectic group of makers and creatives. In many ways HUMANWINE embodies the ethos and approach of steampunk: self-sufficiency, repurposing resources, reclaiming identity and breaking away from the self-defeating mechanisms and disempowering systems.

This is the reason I chose to interview Holly because of her, and the bands, survivalist, self-reliant leanings and anarcho-punk, dystopian aesthetic presentation/philosophy. Getting this perspective vis a vis the highly stylized, Victorian
and elegance was very important in order to depict the diversity of the community and its makers. It's this diversity of persons and perspectives that allows for individuals and the group to be a more complete whole.

From the start it is clear to me that Holly has some misgivings about some aesthetics in the steampunk movement, particularly the uniform presence of the corset for women and top hat and tailcoats for men. The focus on the opulent Victoriana feels like a bit of a distraction from why, she feels steampunks have gathered: to share the inventions they've made and create new groups and ideas. “Steampunk is an intelligent movement and gets a lot of things right.” However she often refers back to a fan who approached her before a permanence and asked, with an sincerity, I gather, “Are you the steampunk band? Why aren't you wearing a corset?” While I think it's fair to say this innocent question was amusing to Holly, it's clear from speaking with her that it's a touchpoint of concern or a potential red flag. “I'm concerned that people will see it as only an aesthetic movement and make it superficial.” They will be distracted by all the beautiful clothing, the pretty people in corsets and monocles and miss the message behind all of it: make you're own machine and reclaim your own power through self-sufficiency. Take responsibility for yourself and how you treat the environment. While many people are doing, making and thinking, I get the sense she worries that many people are being distracted by the spectacle and performative aspects of the steampunk events, which is natural. But I point out that people spend a lot of time working on their costumes or crafts.
and creations, that for them the even is a place to gather, relax and share. The may feel the work is done. “Oh, I absolutely see that. There are tons of people from the LARP (Live Action Role Playing), Dungeons and Dragons, Renaissance Faire scenes. For them, it [steampunk] is more about playing [then it is for me]. Which is fine, I just hope people don't get distracted.”

The conversation focuses on the fashion and particularly the emphasis of costume at the Cons or Fairs. Holly felt that sometimes priorities can get a bit skewed and gives the example from the Steampunk Faire that attendees were assured that events were being shifted because of inclement weather as so peoples outfits wouldn't be ruined. Or the women in what appear to be quite restrictive or revealing outfits with modified 'weapons' (non-functional bows or swords, or the omnipresent ray gun) and high heels. We agree that part of the fun of the event is the participatory nature of everyone making things or wearing costumes they made. “It feels very short sighted.” to make things that can't endure a drizzle or that really aren't practical. That is sort of the point of steampunk, to make things; consume less but better quality. It really should be about reusing. I'll just get a new one, is a platitude that has no place in the maker and steampunk community. Holly posits that to be truly radical, and more authentically survivalist that more steampunk makers should try to barter goods and services among each other as an example to corporations that this group can do fine on its own.

I begin to joke with her that she sounds like she was lost in a masquerade ball.
She replied, “We really don't mind being part of it [the steampunk community]. We feel really welcome and accepted. The roots of it [the movement and the non-Victorian focused aesthetic] are anarchist: make your own machine.” I begin to explain that I have a broader definition of steampunk as one that implicitly includes makers, crafters, burners, hackers and generally productive oddballs and creatives. For me, steampunk is more of a verb, more of an intent. Holly seemed really receptive to that and commented that the best part of the events, for her, was to see the inventions and functional sculptures that people create with ingenuity and recycled or recovered materials that vendors would sell. She was disappointed the makers and inventors weren't a larger part of steampunk events, or at least the one's she's been to.

This subject reminded us of the inventions, installations, industrial sculptures of Burning Man, particularly how steampunk aesthetics (gears, goggles, ray guns, 'industrial Victoriana') and ethos ('love the machine, hate the factory') are very present at burner events because, as I've observed, the communities share members. Holly seemed to agree with that. We talked about what that means. The idea that individuals can belong to small groups or classifications like an interest group or genre subculture, then go to a large event, like a regional burn and then take those influences and not only go back to their everyday life and influenced people, but go to a fair or con a month later. The ways in which the flow of ideas can cross-pollenate among groups far and wide is really exciting. We agree that the goal of self-sufficiency begins by learning, by gaining skills and

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sharking knowledge from a variety of intelligent sources.

We pondered how the ideals of beauty, of form, function, and resourcefulness that come from the functional sculpture and other active art pieces of Burning Man have the characteristics of steampunk. “Definitely, makers and burners are a modern army.” She recalls that when they performed on the west coast many of the burners, or attendees of Burning Man and similar regional events, and other makers were staples at their shows. People would cook, make art, make inventions and anything useful. “Community is made through making.”

Some other similarities are the amalgamation of both groups “[in both groups] everyone is welcome. No one is turned away for being too weird.” However, we agree that there is a pretty clear code of conduct; while Burning Man maybe very free and eclectic, it prides itself on being a positive and safe experience for all its members. The same goes for a steampunk events and forums, both real and virtual. “If someone is acting up, acting out of line, they will be corrected by the group and or tossed out.” Everyone looks out for each other so the integrity of the space or the event can continue. I ask her if she feels that there is an egalitarian quality to the events. “There are leaders and followers in any group. We have felt there is an equal relationship between us, the makers and the attendees, generally.

Of steampunk she said, “It is an intelligent movement, but it could really be doing things more radically, more sustainably, but there is something there. [I am just concerned
that] It could be commodified by some on with a lot of virtual power.” We discussed what that would mean and who could even achieve such a task. I pose that if the essence of steampunk is creativity, making, and quality then can it ever be store bought? “There is a strong core [of the group I believe] won't break way, the self-reliant, off the grid form of lifestyle. People who believe in taking care of themselves [and the earth] and learning to make what you need.” The utilitarian type of steampunk which is deeply in love with the moment of invention, wonder and the precipice of what innovation and revolution can do.

We discuss why the historical elements of steampunk are so attractive. “In any popular thing, Pirates of the Caribbean or Star Wars, there is a [romanticism] of the Victorian and of old fashion luxury. She remarks of the customs and clothing, “It's something we don't have to do, it's something we can choose to do.” (e.g. wear a corset or bustles or monocles and waistcoats). It's the illusion of choice, we can choose to do something that others didn't have the opportunity to choose. I gather that Holly thinks that affecting historical dress is problematic in the way that it allows us to play pretend; to pretend certain things didn't happen (slavery in the American South, the servitude and oppressive working conditions of the Industrial era) or that things aren't happening right now. (e.g. the wars in the Middle East, the gulf oil spill (2010), the Great Recession (2009-)). It seems the feels that uncritical appropriation of Victorian or Colonial era attire is choosing to adopt the modes of oppression that generations prior worked so hard to
render moot. The breezy way in which garments and accessories and worn for pleasure or entertainment yet the meaning of their symbolism is ignored and in the case of steampunk, over written, possibly without enough critical reflection. Holly really appreciated that people are “making things and coming together, that is something that steampunk does really, really well. When we speak there is touch of skepticism. I look around and “see a lot of costumes instead of people creating [useful] things. Many people enjoy steampunking as a hobby, as an escape from a busy or maybe creatively stifled work week. “What people don't realize is that the life they are escaping is of their making. What's keeping you down is spending money to have superficial fun. To really feel refreshed, grow food, make something you need.”

We talked a bit about her music and how she felt about the role or the mechanism of alternate realities in creative spaces (e.g. music, social settings). I asked this question particularly because many of HUMANWINE’s songs take place in an imaginary place called VINLAND which is a metaphor. A place and a parable for the power struggles, injustices, the social, political, and ecological deceptions faced in the 'regular' world. “I use VINLAND as a metaphor to get a message across to people. Some people can just enjoy the beauty of our music and not feel like we are preaching to them, but maybe they will hear something. Some people can engage with the music and the politics, then do something about it.” My take on the meaning of VINLAND was somewhat confused, I thought it operated for Holly and M@ the same way the alternate realm or identities that
many costumed steampunks affect worked. Holly's intent is not to escape, withdraw or reject reality but to tell the stories we see on the news and in our lives in a different way, a way that gets through to people, or at least the people who want to hear it. For Holly, the world she creates is a metaphor not for her or a select group of listeners, but a mechanism intended to get information across to as many different people that come in contact with the song. The intent is a lot more straightforward and has none of the affect I had imagined.

We talked about how the band left Boston for a few years to travel around the country and get a feel for the west coast. “We were just frustrated here, it was a tough time. Boston was a weird place.” I asked if they got a lot of resistance for the kind of music they were making or their themes and leanings. Her reply was a hesitant no, but modified by the fact that the often weren't accepted because of the way they looked. “I think the indie crowd would have paid attention [to what they were saying] if we were wearing hot pink high tops and looked like M.I.A.” It was tense for a while in Boston. Things were very exclusive, very selective, very divided. “I remember, maybe it was the 90's, when it was cool to care. Cool to care about issues and art. But around the late aughts “apathy and consumption became cool. We felt like we couldn't set a fire here.” It seemed like people chose to be ignorant. There were a lot of scenes or small countercultures in Boston (as well as other places in the U.S.): burlesque, dark/punk cabaret, circus, tribal, goth and industrial. All these groups contributed, population wise
to the momentum of steampunk. Holly pointed out that many of the mini-subcultures, art-
groups or bands around the city at the time were very campy and were really fun, but
didn't seem to have much of a message or higher concept to get across. “We went away
just to see what else was going on. But we came back to see if the seeds we'd planted
were growing.”

I try to get a sense from Holly why she thought steampunk had grown and if she
thinks that maker chic is something that will continue to gain strength and numbers. I
think it's popular for upper class, middle or even lower middle class kids – anyone can be
a part of it. But we were in Oakland and there are a lot of folks who still get sucked into
wanting the glamorous things on MTV. There are a lack of necessities there. People
there are very resourceful.” I got the sense that generally people are suspicious of self-
reliance models like biodiesel, urban foraging gardening, general repurposing, versus
consumption. We agree that those are larger systematic issues and that steampunk, as a
community, is a lot more available to a wider range of people. However it could still
benefit from discussions on race and class. Though some of those are happening online,
we both agree that these are topics which would benefit from face to face discussion.
While Holly didn't seem to think it was too important or meaningful that steampunk
aesthetic was becoming so popular in mainstream media and design, we did fully agree
that the curiosity in the ethos of steampunk and even the time period is a good thing. It
signals the acceptance of curiosity, self-sufficiency, passion and other qualities that were
marked as deviant or unacceptable for some time.

The idea of steampunk as a verb and philosophy (more than only an aesthetic) seems more appealing to Holly. Maker culture and the respect for innovation aspects of steampunk are positive. The make, create, repurpose, reuse ethos is important for improving a quality of life for all things. “It's part of an awareness, of being present, of making things and making choices” of what you will and will not do or consume. I ask her if she feels that steampunk as a movement and as an approach can be socially and politically meaningful, Yeah, the part of steampunk that tells you to make what you need, I love it! Don't destroy the earth while we are here- “just live with out plastic things.” Do what you do – stop buying products, be self reliant, be in control of yourself while to still can.

M@ McNiss and Holly Brewer of HUMANWINE.
Interview with Sarah Edrie of Walter Sickert & the Army of Broken Toys

Compiling my interviews, conversations and qualitative data has been a pleasure because it has provided me the chance to reconnect or to connect in more depth with peers, friends and performers who I respect and who have found a kindred space and a warm reception in the emerging community and alternate realms of steampunk. Sarah Edrie exists in multiple realms: she is a published writer, blogger, PR and social media maven, a photographer, performance artist, singer, songwriter, muse and generally culturally savvy person. In another life, she is a successful professional at a prestigious Massachusetts university. If I didn't believe in time travel, alternate realms and superpowers before, keeping track of Edrie's weekly schedule and accomplishments has made me a believer. Sara is a co-founder of Walter Sickert and the Army of Broken Toys which has been featured on NPR, in The Boston Globe, The Boston Herald, The Phoenix, has toured nationally and internationally. Their avant guard, eclectic cabaret, performance art approach has been welcomed by the steampunk community and they have been regularly featured guests at steampunk themed events and shows.

Edrie has had the opportunity to move with and through such a variety of artistic
circles, having performed at steampunk events and have generally lived the life of a modern vaudevillian. I was thrilled at the opportunity to hear her insights (positive, negative or ambivalent) on the topic of steampunk: how she'd experienced it, seen it evolve, and just general observations and comments on the topic. I'm particularly interested in her point of view as an artist, performer, PR maven and as a generally articulate, culturally savvy person. That combination of identities is why I thought she would be the perfect person to go to on matters of steampunk.

Edrie explains the band's connection to steampunk in the same way several of the other maker's I've interviewed have described it, “steampunk picked us”. “We were first introduced to steampunk when we were asked to play a steampunk event. The promoter had identified us as steampunk even though no one in the band had heard of it as a 'genre' before” We discussed how that seems to be common thread, that one of the few definitive factors of a steampunk event is that it will be an eclectic amalgam of people, ideas, outfits and genres. “I can't think of a community it doesn't pull from, honestly. We even saw furries, and Star Wars geeks and everything in between. It's very inclusive. Not just the kind of people but also the music, the art, all sorts of things can be included and welcomed.”

The hospitality and seeming effortlessly peaceful coexistence of people from diverse groups, (genres of geek culture, art culture, music culture, maker) sharing space without much conflict or hostility is somewhat surprising to me. Yes, everyone is gathered for one reason – steampunk- but the expressions and interpretations of that one word are quite diverse (Dieselpunk, Decopunk, Cabaretpunk, Neo-Victorian, Clockpunk,
Mad scientists, Weird west, Gaslamp fantasy). And very often differing interpretations of a commonly held concept or idea lead to bitter divisiveness and splinter movements. (Of course, examples in religion, politics, and art movements abound) Sure, there is rigorous debate about any number of topics in online forums and panel discussions, but it is usually agreed that despite their differences or even be cause of them, they are all anachronauts.

Edrie and I speak more on the diversity of interpretations on the meaning of steampunk and how people make that meaning through clothing, craft, contraptions and exchanges. We give examples of the boundless expressiveness and enormous effort people put into the costumes and everything that makes a con or fair a spectacle. People are very open, open for anything. The essence of the community is a joie de vivre for the Victorian, for technology, for wonder and for skill and ingenuity. “It's one of the reasons we fell in [to steampunk], so quickly as a band without a genre, we can literally do any sort of music.” It seems that many bands who defy or transcend category find a home in the hearts and ears of steampunks. It follows that if your community members have a wide range of tastes and backgrounds the soundscapes they would choose to create would be equally as eclectic and disparate. “There is so much diversity and for the most part - it is REAL people making the real kind of music they want who don't care too much about labels or genre.”

This quote in particular reinforces the concept of a collapsed hierarchy, there isn't very much of a star versus audience dynamic. This level playing field and lack of classification suggests to me that in fact, the masses are at the helm and not the masters.
Community members make choices for themselves about what their spaces should feel like or feel like; it benefits a top-down system to have divisions and specific classifications, but it is the signal of a democratic, individually empowered system when such things can remain ambiguous, amorphous, open-ended. I assert that in the right situation, this level of flexibility allows people to bring their 'whole self' to a situation and not be segmented and sectioned off the way one can be sometimes in modern life. For example, as one behaves differently at work than with one's friends or family. It's my opinion that the segmenting and compartmentalization of the self is problematic and unsatisfying. But by moving through social-cultural situations where we interact and cope with people, some who we might be more comfortable some who we may find less familiar or agreeable, though this exercise I think that the mosaic of styles, of people, of approaches and the ways they compliment and contrast with each other offer the mind a modality for the multiple qualities and identities of the inner self.

The need to categorize one's self is always a challenge and even more of one when you are an artist “It's funny because to sell music in main stream media you still have to declare yourself as a genre iTunes, Amazon, actual labels. But if you do-it-yourself - which is what we are doing- you really don't have to. So, it feels so much less silo'd to be a part of SteamPunk, which is the genre-less genre.” While there are a bevy of incredibly talented bands at steampunk events, we both agree that the music is really just one of many, many modes of expression and signifiers of the culture. Live music performances are great fun, but they are not the primary, secondary or even necessary modes of expression for a steampunk gathering. The essence of steampunk is something
else. We being to think about what really is the drive, the cultural form that makes this community distinctive, or at least is the impetus for these groups to gather. “I found it to be closely related to the deep need for people to do and share cool arts and crafts. To and combine music and art.” This point seemed so salient to the larger idea of communities being defined by what they, and the individuals therein, make rather than what they consume or affect.

We examine the difference between the DIY and craft culture of the past decade and how steampunk differs from that. “It's really about making and remaking reality, allowing the everyday to be fantastical. It can incorporate literally any time period in history, of course, people have a penchant for Victoriana.” Having the sense that there are choices and that those choices are something you have access to is very empowering. While making and remaking reality may seem abstract or childish or appear to be some defense mechanism, this approach seems to me, very brave and creative. It's a way of finding solutions to large and seemingly insurmountable problems. While steampunk had been around as a cultural and aesthetic reference point for more than fifteen years, it's curious as to why it found it came to prominence in the late 2000's yet, if one looks at the economic and political climate which defined that time, one sees bleak picture with some very intractable problems. Steampunk is a genre that remakes reality, transforms situations and offers creative solutions and alternative interpretations to problems, real or imagined, and respects those who even dare to imagine things and speculate on potential.

“I don't think steampunk is about functionality, it's about making. The thing is the end.” I had to ponder this for a moment because while I disagree with the idea that
steampunk isn't about functionality, I do agree that the intent which motivates the act of creating is the essential factor in steampunk. I do take Edrie's point that much of what is created for steampunk events is not meant to be practical or necessarily used outside the space of steampunk gathering. Mostly the Neo-Victorian pieces or moving sculptures or mechanisms which are just impressive to look at, things that generally are made with care and are meant to evoke wonder. There are also the beautiful and often very delicate accessories (e.g. jewelry) or upcycled antique-like pieces that are stunning yet not very robust. However, I do feel that the feature that distinguishes steampunk with the arts & crafts, DIY as it existed in the aughts is the attention to detail and quality. In terms of clothing for example, materials are usually of good quality, made to last and very often naturally sourced materials such as linen, cotton, bamboo, leather or the like.

The details in the work and durability of the item seem to be highly important as these items are tied to the identity and integrity of their maker; they signify a relationship between maker and the user and that relationship is lateral, interdependent and respectful. While this statement isn't necessarily in opposition to what indie craft culture in the aughts was built on, the importance of specific factors is notable. The importance of elegance in color, in fit, in nearly every aesthetic function, the focus on timelessness (i.e. fashions from 1890-1920 seem to travel time well) the attention to detail be it some intricate embroidery or a clasp will made and affixed and a particularly cleaver way. While the indie DIY culture can be characterized by finding old curtains at goodwill and making a simple shift dress, steampunk DIY takes the approach of how can we take what we have, how do we we make it work better, how do we make it look its best. It's my
opinion that steampunk is a signal of the golden age of craft & artisan culture. This
seems to be an important philosophical, cultural shift, away from being unquestionably
proud of what one makes because just making something is transgressive but the more
satisfying, and arguably more mature, approach of discernment and thinking about the
implications and uses of a piece. Asking the question, can this be better? The importance
is not just that you made it, but that you made something well.

Edrie summed the differences and similarities of indie craft culture and
steampunk designed creations in this way. “This is D.I.Y. on steroids, usually involving
really big ideas. The result can be almost anything, but approach and intent are key.” We
discuss how interactive steampunk events are and she noted that as one of the main
differences she observed between a typical performance with a an ordinary line up of
bands. “People at steampunk events take great care in making the entire show a spectacle,
in that they dress up, are involved, get into the action. More than a regular show they
become part of the performance and production making it a community based/driven
event they don't just passively watch staring at their shoes” This statement again
reinforced my observation that participation, immediacy, radical inclusion, radical self-
expression and communal effort are paramount to the ethos and experience of steampunk.
Likening the experiential component to that of the Burner community.

At this point in the conversation I put forth that idea that the steampunk and
burner communities, though different in their modes of expression shared an ethos,
group members and a bit of an aesthetic. She seemed to agree with this idea, “The
burners come to steampunk events and bring their crazy creations and the steampunks go
to burner events in their costumes and have tea parties.” I thought that perfectly depicts
the interdependence of the communities. The makers who create all sorts of contraptions
and experiences for the burner events find the steampunks to be kindred in that they are
genuinely accepting and interested in the inspiration and workings of the inventions.
Meanwhile the radical self-expression tenet of the burner ethos meshes very well for the
pennant of steampunks to put on their best, bring their own inventions and participate in
character and in kind.

We discuss the place of immediacy and directness verses the apathy,
insouciance in the cultural spaces of steampunk and indie culture. Which leads to the
topic of irony and kitsch versus sincerity and transparency. “I think there is still a large
element of irony [in steampunk] but far less kitsch. The irony is not in the product though,
like years past. It's somewhat in the intent.” This statement was particularly interesting
because I hadn't thought of irony particularly in the way that Edrie was using it so I had
her explain further. “For instance at the [Steampunk World's] Faire there was an entire
contraption set up wherein humans had to sit, stand or work pedals in order to run a
couple of seconds of digital video. Something ANYONE could get on their current cell
phone with one button. But this artist had people DO many things to get [that result].” It
is ironic, in the more traditional usage of incongruity between the effort or intent and the
result. “I think the irony lies in that it could be quite easy to do or get things but
SteamPunk asks for [audience and individual] participation to get the full experience.”

This is an important point: steampunk art and events generally ask people to
participate in places and activities where they would normally be passive. This literal
movement and activity can be seen as a manifestation of people's desire to change, affect, improve and engage with the world around them in a meaningful way. Some people don't want to simply touch the wheel on an ipod, they would rather build or interact with a mechanism and its moving parts. That may be why the universal symbol for steampunk is the gear. It works very well as a signifier of a latent desire to participate and be part of something bigger than themselves. In other contexts the gear is thought of as anonymous, interchangeable or impersonal, but the gear signifier operates very differently in this case. It seems to symbolize the virtue of understanding how things work and how one fits into a larger mechanism. It calls to mind the time when machines were the result of people's ingenuity and resources to overcome difficulties in their way, when the innovation held promise of opportunity and relief from drudgery.

It's a symbol of self reliance and therefore freedom. Don't be part of 'the machine' but build your own machine.

We discuss that while experience and interaction are a big part of the events, no one is forced to do anything they would rather not, those who choose to come observe and participate by just being present are held in the same regard as those who go full tilt. There is very little judgement “you don't have to participate but you can and are welcomed/encouraged to.” This acceptance brought to mind the particular meaning of irony as it operates in the indie community, sardonic tones in the ironic detachment of the indie community which seems to be absent from steampunk..No matter how eccentric, how absurd, people are never mocked, or made fun of in a hurtful manner which seems to be par for the course in indie, or hipster, culture. It appears that the insider-outsider, first
adopter privilege and cultural capital as moral value criterion that seems to deeply motivate the indie culture is absent from steampunk. Generally in the context of a steampunk event, if you aren't familiar with a reference, someone will explain it to you. If you are unclear how a mechanism works or what someone's costume is made of or otherwise have any type question, your unfamiliarity will not be met with a snarky, superior remark but with a clarification. Curiosity is cultural capital. The space of steampunk, in real or virtual life, is a place for people to understand each other and to be understood.

Edrie and I discussed the question which motivates most every discussion I have on this topic which is: Why steampunk? Why now? Like many people I spoke to she didn't seem to think there was a major catalyzing force. Yet she made a very good point, “Things that really catch on are both unusual and also within reach. So it's creative and different but literally anyone can do it - be in it.” That might be the best way to understand the phenomena and to think of how the (seeming lack of) power structure exists. Steampunk, retrofuturism, even maker culture are different ways of understanding and engaging with the the world of around us yet, unlike many other subcultures, societies, the 'entrance' fee is one anyone can afford: curiosity, an open-mind and a little bit of wonder.

We were discussing the diversity - “there isn't much "alike" in steampunk”- and acceptance in steampunk when Edrie offered an observation that I hadn't really considered before. The question posed was about the differences she has experienced or noticed at steampunk events versus traditional venue performances.

“Something strange that I noticed, but it's been several events now that I've seen it at, many
disabled people are involved; [there is a] total acceptance of physical disability. I've never seen it anywhere else. Like a woman who made her own prosthetic foot and showed it off at the fair, a guy in a wheelchair who build this airplane apparatus thing and drove it around everywhere. It was crazy awesome, a sub-sub-sub-culture. It just rather highlights the deep acceptance of difference. I would say it's quite special.”

This wasn't something I had seriously considered but when Edrie pointed it out, I realized it was a fairly remarkable thing. Ableism is a profound and prevalent form of discrimination, one that is taken for granted in many discussions of culture, aesthetics, trends and counterculture. The fact that this community, at least at a glance, is working to and achieving a meaningful level of inclusion, one that is still in process in mainstream society, is very interesting. I thought I'd make an argument about how the sphere of radical self expression, acceptance and inclusion were the reason for the attendance of differently abled folks. However, it occurs to me that a far more practical and simple answer is likely. For those who use assistive devices, there are very few spaces where the use of them is seen as not unusual, but even quite cool. It's a place where people affix an array of gizmos, gadgets and doodads for various purposes.
Edrie sent me this photo after our interview to illustrate the breadth and range of the group's members.

This level of access seemed to be another example of people creating the community they want to live in, even if it is only for a little while. The communities created by steampunks et al. in this way are far more than people 'playing pretend' but creating and modeling, experiencing and expressing. By living in these positive, alternate spaces we can see the changes we'd like to have happen, believe they can happen, learn what they feel like and maybe, bit by bit, bring the skills we learn there into the ordinary world.

Closing Thoughts

It's been a pleasure to observe and analyze and, in a way, participate in the growth of this vibrant, emerging cultural phenomenon. In the beginning of this research I
anticipated simply defining the characteristics unique to this subject, documenting the cultural productions and forms of this new expression and possibly piecing together an origin story for it. Yet as I experienced and observed more of the culture and spoke with the participants and makers, I realized that there is no singular history, or definition for this phenomenon and therein lies the beauty. Much the same way that steampunk is recreated by every practitioner and re-imagined through every event and interaction, one can never quite conclude or objectively assert any single truth about this phenomenon. I can only collect my pieces and contribute my invention to the community and hope that its functional and speaks to someone's experiences. If not, then maybe this work herein can be repurposed to create a better understanding of the form down the road. Where there are disagreements or cogs that won't lace, we can work together, better inform each other and made a more integrated, better functioning understanding.

Much the same way that my research was gathered through interviews and conversations, it is helpful to think of this cultural form as an ongoing conversation. A conversation among equals. This flattened hierarchy and the disintegration of modeled affect and pretense allows for a form of accessibility and a free flow of ideas, innovations, mistakes and triumphs which in the end make for a more productive and well situated way of being. Accessibility grace, wit and inclusivity are all characteristics of productive and illuminating verbal exchange. Thus, this dialogic model is the one I choose to leave the reader with and I wish that the heuristic continuum keep expanding. Where there is dialogue, there can be change and where there is and effort made towards valuing the humanity and contributions of each person there is the possibility of progress.
Even if this possibility is modeled by a few, the media and information flows in our society

It would be unwise and a little incongruous to try to predict the impact, the relevance or direction of this movement in regards to mainstream thinking and understanding of fashion trends and cultural moods other than to say that to me and to many, this form as a movement, as a shape feels right. It makes sense. It offers solutions and possibilities within frameworks that inspire and support movement towards positivity and progress. During times of prolonged crisis and intractable binaries as we have experienced, a third choice, a possibility to overcome that which binds us physically, emotionally, politically, is transformative even in a symbolic form. Re-imagining the paradigm is empowering but re-inventing one which is adaptive, flexible and able to be improved upon in a collaborative, dialogic manner is truly marvelous. The movement, the phenomenon and the society therein shall exist as long as it necessary to move the collective experience towards a more cohesive and comprehensive whole. And while the style and expression may change, the form, the shape the arc of the transcendent function will continue and the movement towards a perpetual, shimmering synthesis.