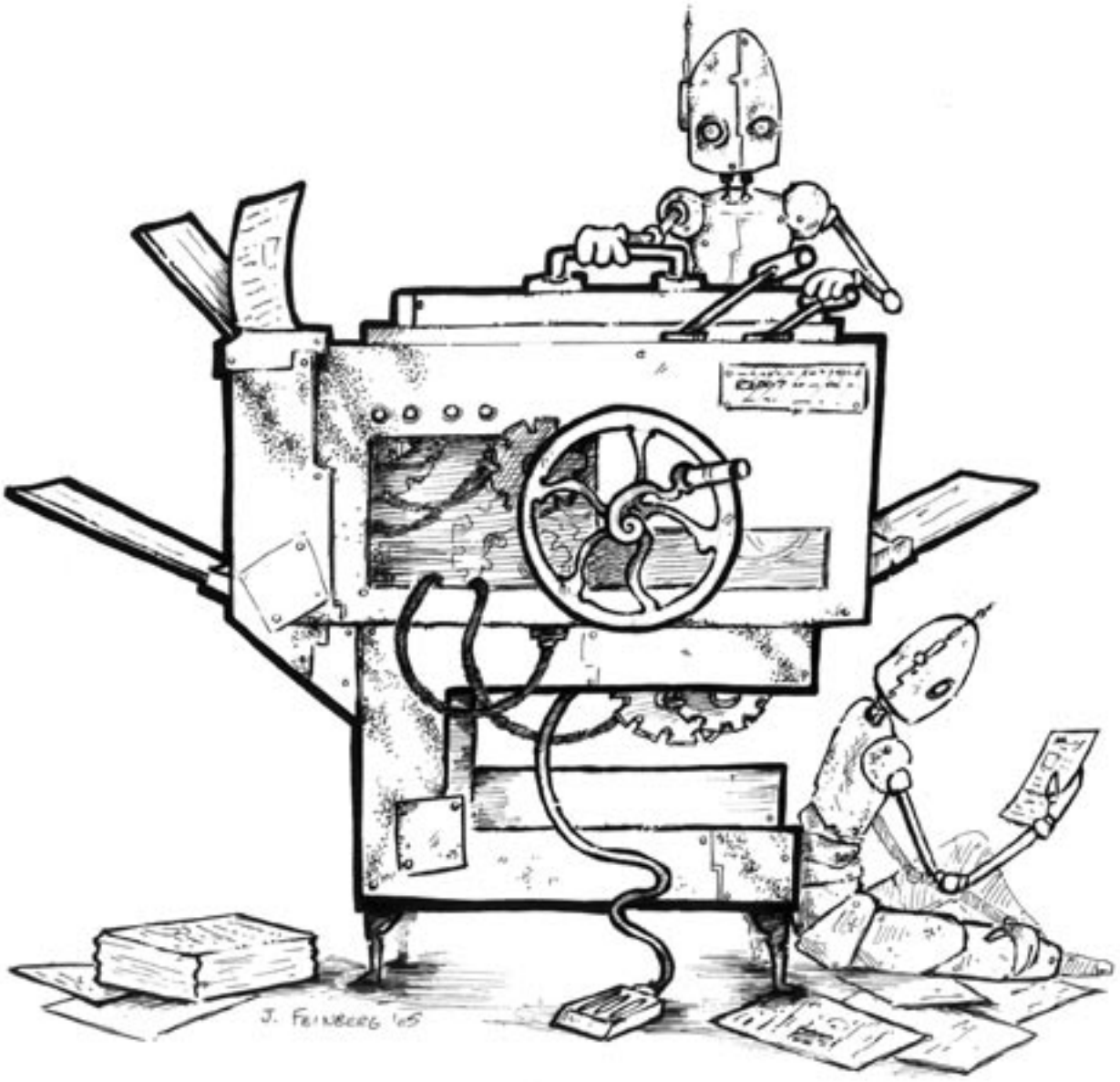
The Drink Tank Presents



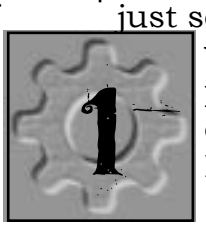
The Steampunk Issue

THE DRINK TANK PRESENTS THE STEAMPUNK ISSUE

Steam & Me

When I was a kid, I used to dream of standing in the middle of the ring having just won the WWF World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship. A lot of kids who grew up during the 1980s had the exact same dream, but mine was different. Not the belt or the standing or even the ring, but the arena. The arena where I won my belt was a massive work of brick and brass inspired, I'd imagine, by the old train stations that populate some of the rail lines I used to travel. The microphone that descended from the ceiling was not one of the handhelds of the 1980s, or even one of the bidirectional ones of the 1930s, but a talking tube. Even as a young one, I had a vision of the world as a SteamPunk entity.

Growing up, my family had a VCR. We got it sometime in the late 1970s, likely 78 or 79. It was a top-loader, a beautiful piece of work that lasted well into the 1990s (and, in fact, may have played its last video in 2000 or so). There weren't a lot of videos at that point. It wasn't until 1980s or so that video stores started to pop up all over the Santa Clara Valley. Disney was one of the first companies to really take advantage of video, releasing many of their great older films right as soon as there was a market. One of the first that my family rented was a film called 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. I truly believe that the height of set decoration was that specific film. No film before or since has been able to capture the perfection of the setting and evoke a wonder. As a five or six year old, it was irresistible. Since I had traveled to the great train stations of America over the years, and even then my family knew a few old-timey theatres where you could see movies, I always saw the world of my imagination steeped in a mysterious haze as if a steam engine had just pulled up to the platform.



Movies were always my entry into every new thing I experienced. Before I was old enough to read, I had the films to keep me thinking. In addition to 20,000 Leagues, there was The Time Machine, The Fabulous World of Jules Verne (in a terrible dubbed form taped from TV), The Island at the Top of the World, Journey to the Center of the Earth, and First Men in the Moon. I ended up watching all of these films over and over again, and I went even deeper.

The Santa Clara Unified School District was one of those few that understood the power of popular literature. We read books that were fantastical, strange, and some even that were Science Fiction. In fact, I often thought that we read a bit too much SF in school. That's a strange fact, but from fifth grade through to senior year, we had to read four or five SF or fantasy (or Magical Realism, which is Fantasy in Spanish) books a year. And they were never the ones that I wanted to read. They were Verne, Wells, Twain, Poe, Heinlein, Asimov, Norton, and most surprisingly of all, Vonnegut. We read them all, and I enjoyed about half of it, but Verne and Wells were my favourites. There was just something about them that made me want to live in an era where I could possibly make my way across town to catch the six-fifteen dirigible for the East Coast.

When I started reading

SteamPunk novels that were intended to be SteamPunk novels, I found my niche. Tim Powers, Jimmy-Jam Blaylock, KW Jeter, and even William Gibson & Bruce Sterling. There were hundreds of great tales and beautiful moments, and as a college kid catching them a little bit after they had hit the streets. I read SteamPunk with a vicious intensity, scouring bookstores and falling in love with delicious visions of a past that I liked far better than the past that I knew actually existed.

I was probably born a historian. I've always loved exploring the traces of those who are gone and coming up with explanations and theories for why they did what they did. I always found the past exciting and constantly changing. That may sound strange, but the fact is our view of something as amazingly well studied as the 16th Century has changed more dramatically over the last thirty years than it had over the previous three hundred. History changes as we search, make discoveries, dig beyond the obvious and find that we're just thrown off course by the layer on top that seems easily mined. SteamPunk does that to me, it gives me a history that I know didn't exist, but in many ways could and possibly should have been the reality of the time. That's why I love it, and that's why I'm doing this issue.

Iron Stick Stand by Christopher Dresser

A Series of What Ifs: Charles Babbage in Philadelphia in 1830, New York in 1840, San Francisco in 1850, and Boston in 1860.

Charles Babbage was a genius. He was no manager, but he certainly had a vision of mechanization that went a long way beyond the rest of his generation. When I started thinking about this issue, I knew I wanted to explore Babbage a bit, but I wasn't sure in what way. So much has been done about getting his engines working, but little had been done on Babbage and his concepts being moved out of London.

I have always thought that in England your proper stance as a scientist or academic is measured by what you can show off at the major exhibitions. In the US, it is and always was how much money your idea made for you and your backers. This is one of the reasons I think that Babbage would have been a fair bit better off in the US than in the UK. With money showing as the guiding light, a lot of things could happen as far as financing goes. It's more likely that his pools of money would have dried up slower and that he'd have likely had more help getting his ideas completed. Here are my looks at how much being in various different areas at various different points would have affected him.

Philly: 1830

Philadelphia had been a centre for American invention for decades. Ben Franklin had come to Philly with that in mind and by the time he passed, he had solidified Philly's rep as the centre for science and invention. If Babbage had come to Philadelphia in 1830, he would have found that the city was awash with bright young talent, much of it from overseas, and much of the upper-layer talent ran about forming various companies. In many ways, The City

of Brotherly Love was the Silicon Valley of the 1820s and 30s.

In this age and place, I think Babbage would have done remarkably well. He had the know-how to design, but not to build these beasts. In Philadelphia, he would have found some of top talent in building, probably right up there with London. The big difference is that appealing to the common mass of those wishing to make a lot of money allows the benefit to be seen much more easily. I would say that Babbage could have easily hooked up with a group of investors and if not built the damn thing. The likelihood of continued attempts is also higher in Philly. My guess is it still wouldn't have produced a full working Difference Engine, but it would have done better than they managed in London.

New York in 1840

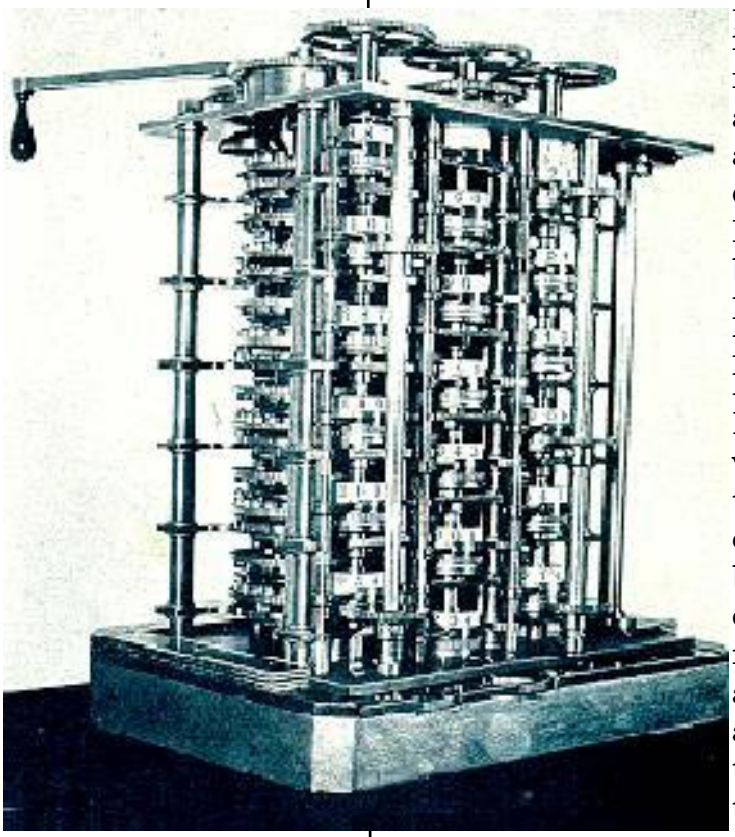
This is an interesting scenario. I'd imagine that Babbage would have been a real sensation arriving in NYC around 1840. Many Brits and Frenchmen came to NYC in those days to give lectures and make a lot of money. Some of them even made it happen. The first thing Mr. Babbage would have been in demand for would be lecturing. It was these lectures that often allowed the men to gather followers and get money. Babbage, supposedly a fun speaker, would have stood a good chance of getting some serious cash behind him. The issue wouldn't have been funding, but it would have been more about finding the right people to build the machine.

New York was the centre of the US economy at that point and everything could be received, but the prices would always be highly inflated. Frequently, that alone would be enough to scuttle a project. The mark-up would typically be between two hundred and four hundred percent. The technology was probably around the level that Babbage would have required to actually make the Difference Engine, but the price would have been quite high.

My guess: Babbage gets slightly further than he got in England. The prices would not have made it easy and he would have run through the funds he would have acquired very quickly.

San Francisco in 1850

There's no question that there was plenty of money running around SF in 1850. People started bringing in famous people from around the world about fifteen minutes after gold was discovered in the Sierras. Babbage would have been popular, but he would have had a harder time getting his things made. San Francisco merchants would have realized that Babbage's machines would have been hugely useful, especially since they needed tables to be accurate as much as anyone and buying the books of tables that were produced on the East Coast didn't help keep costs low. He probably could have raised more money in SF than anywhere else in the US at the time.



The machining requirements

would have been seriously lacking. It's doubtful that he could have found anyone who could have done the work that his machines would have required until at least 1855, and by that point, he'd probably be back to England having not found a serious source of parts. I don't think this scenario would have led to him getting a completed machine, or even a completed section, but he would have done well financially in the City by the Bay.

Boston in 1860

A lot of people overlook Boston. If Babbage had managed to keep his interest on Difference Engines into the 1860s (when he was in his 70s), he'd have had a greater likelihood of making his dream come true. The technology was there, and the mills around Boston were as advanced as any in the States. The precision required to make the exact gears was there in many areas, especially those areas around Lowell. The money was there too. Most of the great colleges in Boston were founded in the late 1800s with the money that Boston would become known for. Sadly, it wouldn't have been a huge deal to get it made, but there's no way they could have finished it.

Boston was one of the locations where many immigrants were taken off to serve in the Civil War. With them went much of the money. Boston grew richer off the Civil War than any other area, but it was through the investment they made during the war, and many of the non-war related industries were sent off to die until the war ended. This would have irreparably damaged the building of the machine, and by the time the focus could have returned, he would have been just about dead. So, it would never have happened.

So there you have it, Babbage would have been doomed no matter where he was located. It's a sad tale, but it's true. Genius often goes unrecognised in one's lifetime, but the harder part is when everyone else realises that you're a genius, but still can't make it happen. Sadly, Babbage, no matter where he was, probably would have failed and died as a footnote.

How to SteamPunk: A Guide to Writing Cheesy Purposely Dated Science Fiction
By
M Lloyd

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, SteamPunk seemed to be all the rage. And why not? It was one of those genres that allowed good writers to take ideas they've had for years and tweak them just enough to sell as a new story, or to simply take a standard SF story and make it into something new. This annoys me.

The best SpecFic is fresh and artful, and if Stephen Baxter has anything to do with it, slimey. Baxter is a good choice to talk about here. His book Anti-Ice is an excellent example of what NOT to do. I know Chris loves the book, but it's so obvious that Baxter was just cashing in on the SteamPunk thing. Anti-Ice is basically what happens when you take the obvious possibilities of that legendary story Queen Victoria's Bomb and combine it with any number of Melies films of Verne novels. It's so pat, so clean, so bloody obvious. I was wrenching my neck, trying to see if Baxter would do anything cool, and instead, he gave us giant monsters living on the moon. How quaint.

Here's a formula I'd like someone to examine. First, take the story of Dune and set it in the Wild West.

Have the Fremen be the Indians and the Harkonnens are the Mexicans or Spanish or whatever. See, a perfect SteamPunk story!

Why stop there?

How about Crash set in Victorian England? Or The Shockwave Rider with Napoleon's France as the backdrop? Maybe it'd be fun to see Scanners Live in Vain fucked with during the Middle Ages. Or what about Dhalgren in Scotland? Yeah, those with a bit of SteamPunk style might actually be great!

Forgive me, I'm bitter, but there are better things that we all could be doing, and SteamPunk writers especially. Even Powers and Blaylock moved on. There's good SteamPunk, like Infernal Devices and The Anubis Gates, but mostly, it's just crap that lazy writers of the 1990s used to take a break and still manage to deliver a manuscript.

Merryweather's Tempest Predictor from the Crystal Palace Exposition. Various versions were made over the years, right up through the Turn of the Century, some of which almost worked!

The SteamPunking of Tomorrowland

By Christopher J. Garcia

It was once the greatest showcase for the future. Tomorrowland. The very term meant The Future for more than three decades. There was a beauty to it, something that effected not only the kids who went running through towards It's A Small World, but also the way designers and others presented the future. Every time the Imagineers redesigned the place, the way the future looked in the average science fiction film changed. The early rockets of Tomorrowland that looked much like the rockets of Amazing covers were replaced by ones that went almost halfway through to the reality of what rockets ended up looking like. Things remained that way until the 1990s, when things were certainly getting a little too dated. This ended up with a redesign that didn't just change the general look of Tomorrowland, but also the way Disneyland dealt with the entire future, by ignoring it…kind of.

In the 1950s, there were many things in Tomorrowland that would be there through the early Nineties. A Mission to the Moon was an attraction where they simulated a trip to the moon for the people sitting in a small theatre. Though they changed it to Mission to Mars, it was the same thing. The Rocket Jets became the AstroJets, but they were all the same round-and-round in circles around a traditional-looking rocket. There was a House of the Future in 1955. It lasted less than 10 years, but it was a fun attraction. They were actually trying to give us a look at a possible future.

They did a large redesign in the Sixties, where things became what they would be in the 1970s and 80s. They added the PeopleMover which was supposed to be the future method of local transportation. They added a series of films exhibiting science fiction, like Captain EO. They had the future in

Tomorrowland's AstroJets: In the Old Days (above) and Recently (Left)

mind, but instead of doing another major redesign in the 1980s, they just added more things. By 1995, the whole place was dated. It's unusual to think that Disney let it get as bad as it did, but they didn't address things until they were seeing visible signs of drop-off in the popularity of the attractions in Tomorrowland.

This led to the destruction of Disney's dealing with the future.

The first thing they closed was the Mission to Mars. This actually upset few people as it was so lame no one really missed it. They locked many of the attractions off and started reworking. They added video screens to the line for many rides, including Space Mountain, and they gave us a few snippets of glimpses at the future. They also closed the lovely PeopleMover. And the AstroJets. And the building that had housed America Sings for so many of my formative years. They gave hints that they were going away from a future theme, but no one was quite sure how far away. We discovered how far when they showed the new Rocket Jets with their giant kinetic sculpture.

SteamPunk.

Disney was no stranger to SteamPunk. They produced several films in the 1950s and 60s that were really the beginning of the modern SteamPunk aesthetic. 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea really set the standard for three decades. It seemed to be a natural that the mainline of Disney thinking would go this way eventually. By the 1990s, the Disney money-making machine was seeing that there were limits. If they could stretch a few extra years out of a design, that could ensure that the theme park remained more profitable by not having to redesign so frequently or widely.

The fanciful visions of trips to the moon were replaced with gears. There were gears everywhere. They had purposely let all the air out of Disney's vision of the future. It's obvious why, but some of the choices were bad.

They added a very interesting ride called the Rocket Rods. It was supposed to be a speed thrill ride. They removed the PeopleMover and used the track for the Rocket Rods. The track was exactly the same as the one for the slow-moving PeopleMover, so the Rocket Rods would have to slow every time it came to turn. There was more wrong with the idea than the ride mechanics. The PeopleMover took you through a number of scenarios, showed various situations that expressed the future of science and microelectronics…and later TRON. Rocket Rods was just a ride. It was just about speed and stylish settings that reeked of retro-futurism. It was the most obvious part of the change, and it's no surprise that it failed within two years.

I've always believed that they found out they made a mistake and started to look forward again. In 1998 or so, they reinstalled something along the line of GE's Carousel of Progress. Called Innoventions, the programme was basically saying all the things that were now possible due to the microprocessor

and other electric innovations. It was the first time that Disney had broken with the SteamPunk theme since the switch. After that, they did Honey, I Shrunk The Audience and since then they've done nothing to advance the theme.

Sadly, there was a lot they could have done if they'd stuck with the SteamPunk theme. There was also a lot they could have done doing supposed Future visions. Now that they've watered down the SteamPunk with the semi-futuristic looks, it's just a sorta there situation.

And even though that's true, I still love me some Space Mountain!

"Disneyland proves my point: Anything Steam-Punky isn't good once it leaves the page and tries to be concrete. It's the whole reason SteamPunk movies fail!"

Jay Crasdan, 1999

The Three Books You Need to Read If You Want To Love SteamPunk

Anti-Ice by Stephen Baxter

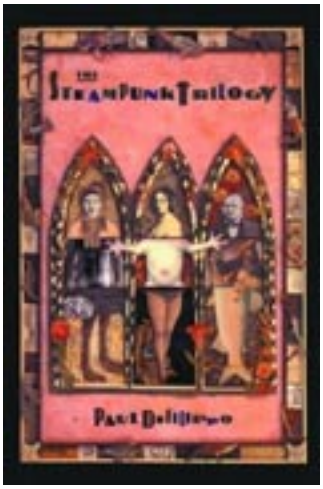
Well, if you're looking for a jumping on point, I'd say Anti-Ice is the way to go.. It's a fun little story that goes to the oldest traditions of science fiction. There's a journalist in the fold of Earth-shattering events. There's a massive scene of destruction. There's a trip to the moon, and there's this stuff called Anti-Ice, which will explode if it's allowed to heat at all. It's a great story that rockets you through all sorts of strange settings. It has elements of Verne and Wells, only with an attitude that speaks of mid-Twentieth Century Science Fiction theory and writing that comes pretty much straight from Baxter's best bag of words. It's a novel that I highly recommend for everybody.

A Trans-Atlantic Tunnel, Hurrah! By Harry Harrison

I happen to own several Harry Harrison novels. I haven't read a lot of them. I bought them, and they sit on the shelf waiting for me to get to them. But for years, three or four in fact, I searched for a good copy of A Trans-Atlantic Tunnel, Hurrah! Without success. I managed to find one and I read it on the BART train as I traveled back and forth from CorFlu this year. It's not Old-Timey, though it also is Old-Timey. The concept is simple: the US never left England's bosom, and George Washington was hanged as a traitor when the Revolution failed. This led the Brits to keep lording over us and led to England to keeping the technological lead over the rest of the world through the Twentieth Century. The plans for a TransAtlantic Tunnel are to allow for the flow of stuff from the US to the UK quickly since the Aeroplane isn't a reliable option yet and trains were improved to the point where they can

go more than 2k MPH!

Harrison does a lot of good stuff, and it wraps up really fun. There are chase scenes and fight scenes and a redeemed character and a doomed romance and a lot of other fun. Looking at the mix of technologies, some old and some new, you get a really fun little world. I love this book, even though Harrison insists on calling the calculating engines Brabbage Engines.



The Steampunk Trilogy by Paul di Filippo

It's hard to think of a writer who was more built for SteamPunk's strange contrasts than Mr. di Filippo (who once said that he liked a story I wrote for Peregrine Nations!). He's got an amazing eye for odd details and dark subjects, and of all the darker SteamPunk, his is easily the best. Perhaps it's because his book is really three highly digestible short stories. SteamPunk short stories aren't around nearly as much as novels, but I think it's really the perfect length for a Victorian Scientifiction tale.

The first of the three is called Victoria. It's a tale of a salamander that has been modified so as to pass for Queen Victoria early in her reign. Well, there's more to it than that (including the salamander being a rather popular prostitute prior to her coronation) but the basic story is strange and uses elements from novels like Frankenstein and movies like Dave. It's an exciting story.

The second is called Hottentots. It's a good little story that features a Lovecraftian theme and monster. Good stuff, though my least favourite of the stories in the book.

The final story is Walt & Emily, a time travel story (well, sort of) and love story between Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. It's a remarkable piece of work with all sorts of strange stuff going on. There's a Ginberg fellow who shows up as well, which might explain how the whole thing has a sort of dream-junkie type quality to it. It's a lovely story and it might be my favourite for rereading in parts.

The Three Books You Mustn't Read If You Want to Love SteamPunk

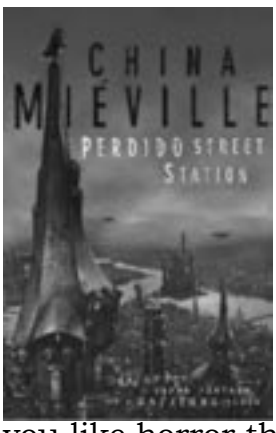
The Difference Engine by Bruce Sterling and Billy Gibson

Bleak. That's how William Gibson seems to see the world, as a bleak landscape of institutions and misplaced trusts. Bruce Sterling isn't much better. The Difference Engine is a book that is CyberPunk through and through, only with a SteamPunk setting. There's no joy whatsoever in this one. It's the dreary world that all of Gibson's novels seem to inhabit, only this one has a nice layer of Victorian grime on in. Hard to recommend, though it was one of the first to really draw folks to the Steam Punk Genre.

Perdido Street Station by China Mieville

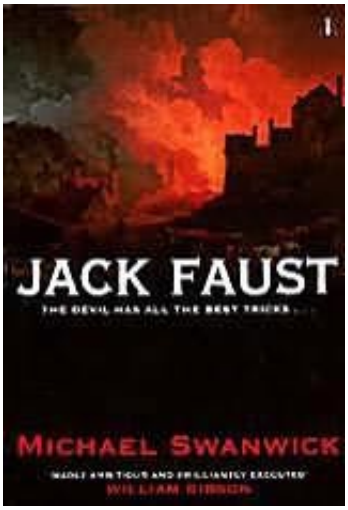
I'm a big Mieville fan, there's no question about that, but I really think that reading Perdido Street Station as a gateway to Steampunk is the wrong way to go.

Really, Perdido is more horror than anything else, even though many of the ideas are solidly in the SteamPunk camp. There are mechanical constructs and beastly machines, but they are also magicians and a whole lot of gross. It's a dark story that will more feel like horror or fantasy and less like SteamPunk. If you like horror though, give it a read. It's very well-written and shows that some people have bizarre minds.



Jack Faust by Michael Swanwick

It's hard for me to say a lot about Jack Faust without looking at



the fact that I love the book. It's just not one you want to come to when you're thinking about becoming a SteamPunk fan. It's a great retelling of the Faust legend with Faust trying to improve the world while also trying to score some tasty trim. It's that type of story.

There's a lot of sex and dirty talk, but mostly, there's a strange story that shows the flow forward of technology at a quickened pace that sets up a world where technology is danger. It's fun, but it really requires one to have more knowledge of the SteamPunk worlds that are out there to make sure that it isn't tainted.

Tales of the Weird West

Before I knew what SteamPunk was, I knew what Westerns were. There were a lot of them on my Pop's bookshelf, but I didn't read many of them. There were also a few that told interesting stories of ghosts and ghouls and gunslingers. These became my favourites.

There's a long tradition of Weird West Tales, dating back to the days of the Old West when newspaper reporters would print outrageous claims as if they were news. There were also ghost stories and the like that got passed around. There were tales of Thunderbirds, of Mines that caused the prospectors who found them to go insane, of phantom trains and Indian massacres that got replayed over and over. These were fascinating to me, and later in life, I discovered the writing of Joe Lonsdale, the master of the zombie western.

The star of the Weird West genre has to be Jonah Hex. A desperado whose faces is mangled by a tomahawk, Hex rode the West as a lawman/killer. It's hard to say what he was really. Jonah led to a long line of other heroes/villains in his mold, but mostly his concept led to role-playing games like DeadLands. Hex's comic book appearances were many, though he was killed off at times, and he always comes back. He's currently awaiting a new title, which I believe launches this falls. There's also talk of a movie, but there was also talk of one back in 1990 or so.

The Weird West tale will be around as long as there are people who love the West and monsters. Old West Ghosts stories are gonna be around forever, and who can blame the writers of them? They're a lot of fun and I'm always willing to fork over the cash for one.

I wanna thank M and Jay for all their help and say that this has been my favourite issue of The Drink Tank Presents so far. The next one will either be the Chess Issue, a Baseball Special or, just maybe, my long-awaited gambling issue. We'll have to wait and see.

The Drink Tank Presents The Steampunk Issue was written by Chris Garcia and M Lloyd with a little help by Jay Crasdan. If you have comments, garcia@computerhistory.org is the place to send them. YeeHaw!!!