Steampunk Remixing in the Classroom: Encouraging Student Engagement, Active Learning, and Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives

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By using Steampunk literature in the classroom, the students became educated and articulate learners, able to engage in a critical dialogue with their own cultural ideologies and values. Not only is Steampunk literature a useful pedagogical tool, it allows students to explore complicated social issues with critical discussion by providing a framework of revisionist history remixed with current cultural anxieties and contexts.

Keywords: circulation, delivery, distribution, remix, rhetorical velocity

In Spring and Fall of 2012, I taught a literature course composed of Steampunk short stories and films. The goal was to explore genre. Throughout the semester I challenged students to label, categorize, and ultimately define *Steampunk* as a literary genre and cultural movement by providing them with vastly different stories, all classified as Steampunk, but rooted in multiple disciplines and critical literary theories. Students engaged Steampunk as a remix of contemporary perspectives and traditional literary styles.

A curious thing occurred; by the end of the semester the students were even more at a loss for the meaning of what *Steampunk* was than when they began the class. However, they knew they loved it.

In this brief reflective essay, I'll survey the Steampunk texts that the students engaged.

About the Steampunk Texts

Since Steampunk is a multifaceted genre that defies definition, almost all students connect with the literature and find areas of interest within the texts. By teaching a multitude of Steampunk short stories (using Ann and Jeff Vandermeers' *Steampunk Reloaded* as the main text of the course), students were able to critically and articulately discuss issues of human rights, science, technology, art, philosophy, cultural and historical perspectives/ideologies, and the essential meaning of being human. "Machine Maid" by Margo Lanagan allowed for an intense discussion on women's rights during the Victorian Period, which ultimately led to a discussion of current issues of gender and gender representation in present day culture. Cherie Priest's "Tanglefoot" and Ramsey Shehadeh's "The Unbecoming of Virgil Smythe" addresses the moral responsibility of humans to their artificially intelligent mechanical counterparts – moral questions and discussions that humanity will have to face sooner rather than later with inventions such as Boston Dynamic's Big

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Dog, super computers on the verge of breaking the Turing Test, and the infamous Watson who thoroughly trumped his human competitors in Jeopardy.

However, Steampunk has its roots in traditional literature. Combining the wild mechanical imaginings of Jules Verne and the social allegory and commentary of H.G. Wells, students were able to trace the historic pre-cursors of the genre including a brief history of landmark texts that provided staple elements of Steampunk. Vandermeer writes,

> the world Steampunk had inherited is the technological nightmare that Verne and Wells predicted at their most cynical . . . Taking from Verne the gift of fantastical and playful imagination, and utilizing Wells's sociological approach to facilitate changing the future, Steampunk rewrites blueprints, reinvents steam technology, and revamps the scientific romance to create a self-aware world that is beautiful and at times nostalgic, but also acknowledges dystopia.[1]

Shelley's *Frankenstein* illuminated the uncomfortable and occasionally dangerous human relationship with science and technology, while Doyle's Sherlock Holmes influenced the detective mystery side of the genre. Dickens elucidated the disparaging gaps dividing humanity – social and economic classes, gender, etc. – that are magnified in Steampunk, due to the conflicting ideologies that scaffold the genre. Steampunk not only teaches historical literary contexts, but also provides a venue for examining how those historical contexts inform our current culture, rhetoric, and ideologies.

Steampunk Reading Strategies

While Steampunk is based on a revisionist remixed version of the past, it primarily concerns itself with our looming future. According to Bruce Sterling in "The User's Guide to Steampunk," "Steampunk's key lessons are not about the past. They are about the instability and obsolescence of our own times."[2] Throughout the class, students were able to make significant connections from the text to their own experiences of culture, providing for a level of enriched discussion rarely achieved in most literature classrooms. Concepts such as gender identity, sustainability, and technological obsolescence were only a few of the issues raised by the texts and allowed the students to extensively develop their critical thinking skills and practice of rhetoric in the classroom discussion setting.

Ultimately, and what makes Steampunk such a beautiful structure to teach within, the short stories gave students a frame of reference and a language to non-threateningly discuss the human ethics of our own culture. Jaymee Goh, a scholar of postcolonial steampunk, states, "I, for one, would like to see steampunk grow as a story-telling vehicle that invites diversity and self-awareness, touching all corners of the world . . . With the research into history, steampunk could be an avenue for cultural pride and acceptance of different perspectives, as well as a really entertaining tool for education."[3] In our current culture, where most students are lulled into complacency with

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[1] Jeff Vandermeer, *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets, and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature* (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), 44.

[2] Bruce Sterling, "The User's Guide to Steampunk," in *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets, and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*, by Jeff Vandermeer (New York: Abrams Image, 2011).

[3] Jaymee Goh, "International/Multicultural Steam," in *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets, and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*, by Jeff Vandermeer (New York: Abrams Image, 2011), 410.

never-ending bits of information that bombard the addictive pleasure centers of the brain, questioning and reevaluating our cultural values and norms is non-existent. However, Steampunk literature forces the reader to be an active cultural participant, ask "why?" and take nothing for granted through intense perspective shifts, as in Valente's "The Anachronist's Cookbook," where the main character is portrayed as a violent rebel activist – and is then revealed to be a champion for the oppressed, and the blurring between reality and fantasy, as in Lee's "The Persecution Machine" – where a man is relentlessly pursued by a symbolic demonic steam engine only he can see.

Active reading and learning through the remixes of Steampunk forces students to extensively develop their critical thinking, rhetoric, and reading skills while evaluating their own understanding of culture. As Scott Church tells us remix is "a communicative practice, a frame that illuminates the rhetorical dimensions, persuasive possibilities, and cultural implications of remixed artifacts,"[4] and Steampunk literature pulls "rhetorical dimensions, persuasive possibilities, and cultural implications"[5] of both our history and our contemporary scene into students' consciousness.

Steampunk Creative Strategies

To bring the genre of Steampunk full-circle for the students, I designed a final project to put them in touch with the cultural movement: they had to make a Steampunk *something*. To this end, I allowed extensive personal creativity. Initially, the students balked at the idea; they had studied the genre extensively, but to actually *Steampunk*? This was new.

This project, the shifting of Steampunk from an adjective to a verb, made the genre real for the students. They became intensely passionate about their creations. One student made an entire dress costume with a complete Steam history for their character. Another, an engineering student, made his own version of a steam engine, which ran on a can of Sterno. A young woman studying art and design created a collage straight from one of the texts we read in class; later she entered the work into an art competition and won first place. While there was a writing component to the project, the assignment allowed the students to explore the meaning of Steampunk in a tactile, personal, collaborative, and creative manner, setting them in touch with their own potential as an active and critical force in their culture. Each student in the class had his or her own definition of *Steampunk* by the end of the semester, but each individual understanding of the genre and sub-culture comprised the essence of Steampunk.

Through *experiencing* this remixed literary genre, the students became educated and articulate learners, able to engage in a critical dialogue with their own cultural ideologies and values. Simply put, Steampunk literature makes students excited to read (and write!) critically, to engage in complex discussion, and to passionately pursue Steampunk-related activities outside of the classroom, leading to well-rounded students fascinated with literature and prepared to critically engage our 21st century remix culture.

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[4] Scott H. Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher and Xtine Burrough, 43-53 (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43.
[5] Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," 43.