

Playing Dress-up

It's a subculture that melds cyberpunk with Victorian-era technology and style. **Roger Collier** looks at the origins of the steampunk movement and checks in with Ottawa's first family of steampunk to discover that membership in their costumed clique has swelled to nearly 200 in just one year

STEAMPUNK 101. The person in the conference room dressed as a powder blue dinosaur in a satin dress is definitely not steampunk. Neither is the man with the gargantuan headdress of multicoloured feathers. But the guy to my right in the stovepipe hat? Hmmm, maybe. He's sporting a retro beard, the kind without a moustache like Abraham Lincoln had. That's steampunkish. He is also wearing suspenders. Oh, and I can't help noticing that he's holding a five-foot-long cannon made from wood, pipes, and a gold-painted water-cooler bottle. Yep, that guy is totally steampunk, no question.

Most of the people here aren't dressed in steampunk costumes. After all, everyone at the Travelodge Ottawa Hotel and Conference Centre this weekend is here for Naru 2 U, a convention for fans of Japanese animation. That means a lot of dressing up as cartoon characters. But all these people — gloriously bedecked or not — standing around me in this hotel conference room do have something in common: they're all here for a presentation called "Steampunk 101." Like me, they hope to learn about the rapidly growing subculture whose devotees range from goths to grandmothers and from gamers to garage-bound tinkerers.

The steampunk movement, which dates to 2006, is equal parts neo-Victorian fashion, science fiction, and do-it-yourselfism. Members of the subculture dress in fancy costumes, hold Victorian-themed parties, create elaborate fictional backstories for themselves, transform modern gadgets into intricate masterpieces of brass and copper, and carry Nerf guns painted in metallic colours. Intrigued yet?

Steampunk's origin lies in a genre of speculative fiction that gained popularity two decades ago. In the late 1980s, several science fiction writers, inspired by the works of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, began setting their novels in the Victorian era.

Family affair: For Lee Ann Farruga, Pat Gilliland, and their daughters Rowan (top) and Miranda (bottom), steampunk is a fun hobby that turns every third or fourth weekend into Halloween. Whenever the family attends a steampunk event, Rowan puts on a leather aviator skullcap and brass goggles and becomes Estella Kipps, an airship pirate, while Miranda transforms into Ophelia Kipps, a professor and an explorer. Mom is Countessa Lenora, a wealthy three-time widow who explores the world in an airship, and Dad is her trusted mechanic

The characters in their stories wear tailcoats and bustle skirts. They fly dirigibles. They walk cobblestone roads lined with gas street lamps. But they also carry ray guns and make retro-futuristic machines powered by steam. Think of it as the Steam Age meets the Information Age meets Flash Gordon. "It appeals to all ages, from young anime fans to people in their 70s," explains Lee Ann Farruga of Steampunk Ottawa, who is leading today's discussion with her husband, Pat Gilliland.

In the late 1990s, Hollywood realized that the anachronistic mix of 19th-century fashion and high-tech gadgets described in steampunk novels would look great onscreen. Visually rich movies such as *Sleepy Hollow*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and *Wild Wild West* were all influenced by steampunk. Television producers liked the look too. *Warehouse 13*, a new show on the SyFy network, features antique-looking gizmos such as the Tesla Gun, which fires arcs of electrical energy, and the steampunk aesthetic is also popping up in animated movies, such as the post-apocalyptic film *9*. The ties to animation explain how Farruga and Gilliland were able to book time at an anime convention to talk about top hats and petticoats.

Gilliland, who is 46 and works for Elections Canada, has long been a fan





Sister act: To complete the steampunk aesthetic, photographer Jonathan Hobin had sisters Rowan (left) and Miranda pose in the train hall at the Canada Science and Technology Museum. Their Victorian “industrial look” was augmented by makeup artist Dee Dee Butters, who successfully combined glamour with sootiness

of Victorian-era literature, so when he read about the steampunk subculture on the Internet a few years ago, he found it intriguing. Last February he created the Steampunk Ottawa group on Facebook.

hobby that turns every third or fourth weekend into Halloween. Whenever the family attends a steampunk event, 13-year-old Rowan puts on a leather aviator skullcap and brass goggles and becomes

shiny, but to a steampunker’s eye, they pale in comparison to the intricate beauty of 19th-century technology. In the Victorian era, function was integrated with decoration. Individual components

A typical steampunk outfit mixes Victorian class with modern cool. Today Lee Ann Farruga is wearing a feather hat, a white blouse, an ankle-length skirt, and a torso-hugging leather corset that could have been plucked from the closet of Lady Gaga. “The punk part comes from playing with the fashion,” she explains

A month later he and Farruga hosted a steampunk tea party at their home in the Island Park area. Ten people attended. A pub night followed, then a movie night, each attracting more people. In August, in conjunction with the Toronto Steampunk Society, they organized a group trip to Hog’s Back Park to attend Carnivale Lune Bleue, a fair modelled after Depression-era road shows. Nearly 40 people showed up, all dressed in Victorian clothing.

The youngest members of Steampunk Ottawa are Gilliland and Farruga’s two daughters. For them, steampunk is a fun

Estella Kipps, an airship pirate, while Miranda, 11, transforms into Ophelia Kipps, professor and explorer. Mom is Countessa Lenora, a wealthy widow who explores the world in an airship, and Dad becomes her trusty mechanic.

BUT THERE’S MORE TO STEAMPUNK than old-time fashion and role-playing. The subculture’s rapid growth has been fuelled, in part, by a backlash against the aesthetic of today’s mass-produced technology. Modern gadgets may be sleek and

— cogs, coils, gears — weren’t hidden. Inventors displayed the inner workings of their machines because that’s what made them so interesting — that’s why they inspired such wonder and awe.

“We tend to forget that there used to be art in technology,” says Daniel Proulx, a Montreal steampunk artist whose work is on display in the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, England. “Technology used to be beautiful.” Proulx makes statues and jewellery that are incredibly intricate in design, much like the Victorian machines he admires. One of his statues, a

Society

creepy octopus-like creature he calls The Beholder, was featured on the high-traffic website Boing Boing, which bills itself as a “directory of wonderful things.” Proulx’s most popular works are his rings, made from unusual stones and inlaid with tiny gears and watch parts. “They look like they have a sense of purpose,” he explains. “You see one, and you feel like it could be a machine, like it could work.”

While Proulx makes art that resembles technology, many do-it-yourself types in the steampunk subculture modify technology to look like art. Some remove the plastic shells of their laptops and encase them in pine, maple, or oak before setting them on copper claw feet. Others might modify their computer keyboards to look like old typewriters, embellishing them with brass and old typewriter keys. Still other steampunkers modify their electric guitars, LCD monitors, and cellphones with cogs and gears and burlap. In an interview with *The Boston Globe*, Paul Di Filippo, author of *The Steampunk Trilogy*, celebrated the aesthetic, saying steampunkers were recapturing the “rich visual vocabulary totally lacking in today’s plastic, cheap-jack gadgets.”

It is this artistic aspect of steampunk, in combination with the literature and the fancy duds, that drew Gilliland to the subculture. He admires quality craftsmanship and likes the idea of making things that are beautiful, unique, and free of cheap plastic. A month before the anime convention, during a steampunk event at his house, Gilliland showed me a generic USB stick. “You can find these anywhere,” he said. Then he held up one that he had encased in wood and accented with brass and an old silver earring. “There is only one of these in the world.”

Many others evidently share Gilliland’s interest in all things steampunk. Just 10 months after they launched the group, the Facebook membership of Steampunk Ottawa has swelled to nearly 200. Interest is growing in other Canadian cities too. Within the past year or so, steampunk communities have formed in Montreal, Calgary, Vancouver, and Toronto.

Adam Smith, a member of the Toronto group, is a long-time friend of Farruga and has attended several Steampunk Ottawa events. He also attended this year’s Dragon Con, the massive science fiction and fantasy convention held annually in Atlanta, Georgia. It was there that

Society

Smith, who makes costumes and props for movies, noticed how quickly the subculture is growing. “Last year only a handful of people there were doing steampunk,” says Smith, who had just returned from fitting Milla Jovovich for a leather costume on the set of *Resident Evil 4*. “This year there were more than 400 of us, all in costume.”

Steampunk costumes are often elaborate, though not necessarily expensive to create. Farruga, a legal secretary on weekdays, buys items from thrift shops and modifies them with industrial-style accessories made from materials such as iron, brass, and distressed copper. Today at the conference, for instance, Farruga is wearing a feather hat, a white blouse, an ankle-length skirt, and a torso-hugging leather corset that could have been plucked from the closet of Lady Gaga. “The punk part comes from playing with the fashion,” says Farruga.

The sophisticated look of steampunk clothing is one reason the subculture appeals to such a wide age group. Members of other subcultures who participate in costume role-playing look far less classy. Consider the anime crowd at Steampunk 101. So far, I’ve spotted a samurai, a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger (the red one), a frog, the aforementioned dress-wearing dinosaur (who is also wearing a grey wig and carrying a Cinderella purse), a sailor with neon pink hair, a sorcerer (I think), and a space pirate with a Pokémon backpack. At any place other than an anime convention, these folk would be as conspicuous as a beetle on Wonder bread.

Not that steampunkers blend in with a crowd. But they don’t provoke the get-a-load-of-that-guy stares as would, say, adults dressed as dinosaurs. If anything, they make everyone around them look underdressed. For example, the outfit Gilliland has chosen to show off at today’s panel discussion consists of a tan kilt, a dress shirt beneath a black vest, and a bowler hat. He looks sharp. If not for his “big flipping gun” — a toy he made from plumbing supplies and the butt of an old rifle — he would look like a dapper gent who overslept by 100 years. In a year or two, if all goes according to plan, there will be no need for a Steampunk 101 lecture at an anime conference. No, in a few years, steampunk will be headlining its own conference, with top hats, tales, and retro gadgetry the order of the day. **END**