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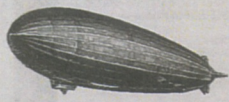
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STEAMPUNK DREAM

STEAMPUNK BURSTS THROUGH ITS SUBCULTURE ROOTS TO CHALLENGE OUR MUSICAL, FASHION, DESIGN, AND EVEN POLITICAL SENSIBILITIES _BY SHARON STEEL



The All-in-One Victorian PC is the perfect little black dress of computer modifications. It's classic and timeless, but has a modern edge that makes it impossible to escape wolf whistles and elevator eyes. Like any good designer, Jake von Slatt knew he had to start with strong raw material. He purchased a 24-inch flat-panel Soyo monitor from OfficeMax for \$299, and fabricated a shell to hide the rest of the computer — including a Pentium IV motherboard, disk drives, and a 350-watt

PSU — behind and inside of it. Most DIY-ers, even some hardcore tech-geeks, would have stopped there, but von Slatt had barely begun.

He poked around his town dump until he found a knick-knack rack that reminded him of a Victorian-era stage set. Framing the monitor with the rack lent it the air of an antique picture frame. Then, he added aluminum and pop rivets, followed by two long pieces of angle iron as “curtains,” to give the

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THE VISIONARY TINKERER With help from OfficeMax and his local town dump, Jake von Slatt (above) turned his 21st-century PC into a Steampunk marvel



KELLY DAVIDSON

MANOR BORN Jamaica Plain resident David Dowling has created the Meandering Manor, a mobile Steampunk platform.

EXPOSING THE WORKS

The cutting edge of tech-design seems defined by whatever Apple develops next. iMacs and iBooks and iPods are idolized for their contained, flawless, streamlined packaging. Anything that might be going on with the chips and wiring underneath the pristine casing remain a blind mystery to the user. Who gives a damn how it works, as long as it's sleek and fits in your pocket?

"There's no style left in craftsmanship," says Rukstela. "I don't look at anything made today, really, and think to myself, 'somebody put a lot of thought into that.'" As a remedy, he founded Kinetic Steam Works (KSW; kineticsteamworks.org), a 15-member Bay Area artist collective dedicated to creatively connecting steam power, kinetic art, and education. The group is made up of ex-NASA workers, senior design engineers, and gear-heads, and their mission as artists is one and the same: expose the works, and make an installation's sweating innards beautiful and intrinsic to its design.

"I'm just a gear-head steam-dork who likes to play with steam engines," says Rukstela, who found himself spending a lot of time around "old-guy hobbies" when he was younger, learning to work on engines in what he calls the "old steam community." He'd then go home to "do the exact same stuff as the industrial-warehouse rats, and use my industrial skills for creating art." In 2002, Rukstela

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using spectacle as a tool to get people to engage with radical politics," says Dowling of its anti-globalization aims. "This project is intended to activate people's interest in creative reuse, sustainability, and alternative-living methods by showing them how cool and accessible it is without preaching about it. It's to build an environment that was made by normal people, with normal means, in a sustainable, socially productive fashion."

Dowling says that Steampunk, until recently, had little to do with "contrapturing" and creative re-use. Now, however, these elements are a well-oiled cog in Steampunk's main engine. Steampunk opens the door to a fantasy-future that can actually — if one wishes and works hard enough — co-exist with the present.

"As we desperately fumble for a way to throw this machine into reverse," says Dowling, "not just in the Steampunk scene but pan-culturally, I think it's only natural that some people should manifest that desire by going back to the beginning — the Industrial Revolution and the Victorians. That's where all this speculative fiction intersects with politics and the DIY movement — a desire to stand on the cusp of the industrialized, mass-marketed, engineered, branded iSpent future and the labor-intensive, technologically impoverished, hand-crafted past and ask: where did we go wrong? What could we have done differently? How can we re-imagine the fiction we will become in the future?"



LEWIS W. PHOENIX FOR THE BOSTON PHOENIX

A HOPEFUL HEART Writer and sculptor Molly "Porkshanks" Friedrich (right) designs usable Steampunk art (above), but takes the movement's ethics as seriously as its aesthetic.



LIBBY BULLOFF

May 3 and 4 Maker Faire in San Mateo, California, a creative DIY festival organized by MAKE magazine. It's at Maker that von Slatt will finally get to meet, in person, a number of the contemporaries with whom he's corresponded. Maker hosted von Slatt and several other Steampunk celebrities in the Contraptor's Lounge, a show-and-tell discussion salon.

"There was so much positive energy and creativity, it was almost overwhelming," Molly "Porkshanks" Friedrich writes in an e-mail message a few days after returning from Maker. "I felt like getting to know everyone in person . . . really vitalized us and gave a greater sense of a real family, not just a group of artisans working with similar tropes." Friedrich, a contributor to *Steampunk* magazine (steampunkmagazine.com) and a found-object sculptor of Steampunk wearable art (porkshanks.deviantart.com/gallery), is at the other end of the Steampunk spectrum from von Slatt. Unlike some tinkerers, she has welcomed not just the aesthetics of the culture but its ethics into her life.

Whereas Cyberpunk posits a dark future, Friedrich says that Steampunk has "a hopeful heart . . . where a balance can be struck between progress and tradition." Friedrich incorporates Steampunk as a strategy of quality consumption and slower living, with a distinct focus on the handmade. "If the idea of always having more is proving to be flawed," she says, "then why not focus on having better of what we do have?"

Friedrich also dresses the part, and she doesn't begrudge people who pick up Steampunk purely for its cos-play affections — there's an entire LiveJournal community, *Steamfashion* (community.livejournal.com/steamfashion/), devoted to Steampunk-styled photo shoots and garment showcases. The Steampunk "look" varies as much as the personalities of its wearer, although Friedrich herself says she enjoys transforming from "a turn-of-the-century jungle explorer" into "a post-apocalyptic warrior in shredded petticoats and bustled skirts." She sells her creations, including her Chrono Corps Emblem ring and an "Ambience Enhancer" — a Steampunked device for holding a modern mp3 player on one's wrist — on etsy.com, the eBay of craft sites.

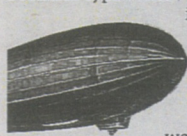
Another of von Slatt's colleagues in the Contraptor's Lounge, David Dowling, is a Jamaica Plain resident, sculptor, and master's candidate at the Boston Architectural College. Dowling, who has a background in blacksmithing, scenic design, engineering, welding, and machine modification, shares Friedrich's Steampunk aesthetic, which sees the movement as one that can galvanize proponents.

To that end, he is working on the building plans for a large-scale Steampunk undertaking he's calling the Meandering Manor — a mobile platform for art exhibitions, maker workshops, performances, and other creative purposes. The Manor, now in the design-and-planning phase, will be erected out of a series of junkyard Steampunked diesel vehicles. They'll fit together like a puzzle, allowing the vehicles to travel independently or in a caravan and be locked together on site. Dowling hopes to start construction this summer.

"The Meandering Manor is about

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monitor-stage a *trump l'oeil* effect. Gold-painted flower scrollwork arches across the top like a crown, and tiny brass feet — miniaturized versions of the ones you'd see on a vintage bathtub — prop the utilitarian *objet d'art* a few centimeters off the table. A tightly coiled wire leads to an elegant, fully functional keyboard, the keys of which have been taken from a 1955 Royal Portable typewriter. The completed PC



is a sexy, ebony-lacquered beauty trimmed in high-polished brass accents.

Von Slatt, who is wearing a bowling shirt and a formal top hat, watches me admire his work with an affable smile. He looks, for all the world, like a man caught between two centuries. For that matter, so does his computer.

Up close, the PC is a tactile wonder, far more extravagant than the pictures I and thousands of others — it had been featured on Boing Boing, Engadget, and digg.com — had gawked at online. I'm itching to press the typewriter keys and, when von Slatt unleashes the DVD drive with a ping and a flourish, I'm tormented that I don't have the luxury of loading in a movie, say, *The Wizard of Oz*, so that I can steer this gothic tech-fantasy to a whole other place. But there's so much else to stare at in von Slatt's Littleton, Massachusetts, Steampunk Workshop — itself a big, pleasant jumble of anachronisms — that it becomes difficult to focus on any one thing.

Von Slatt (a pseudonym) recently blogged about his PC on the Web version of his Workshop (steampunkworkshop.com), detailing the process of its construction and the unique modifications he'd included. Given all of this, it's hardly surprising that he has been lauded as a kind of tinkerer visionary, a man with the mechanical prowess (he's an IT professional by day) and artistic skills to solder technology with craftsmanship and form a new artisanal DIY movement.

But his is only one piece of a larger, nascent subculture called Steampunk. Its basic origins are in a particular sect of science fiction — novels that include Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaire* and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, sci-fi romances that pit retro-futuristic, steam-powered machines against stylized Victorian backdrops. Verne and Wells weren't writing about Steampunk, though — they were writing about their immediate present and prophesizing about what *might* happen if technology continued in the curious direction it had taken. "Science, my lad, is made up of mistakes," Verne wrote in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, "but they are mistakes which it is useful to make, because they lead little by little to the truth."



ETCH A SKETCH Von Slatt's also Steampunked an Altoids tin (above) and his iPod with an image of Lady Ada Lovelace.



PHOTO BY MIKE BECCI (MIKEBECCI.COM); STYLING BY SHANNON MATCH



STEAM ENGINE Jake von Slatt aboard his "Victorian RV" (above), which was, before he Steampunked it, an old yellow school bus.

A PAST THAT NEVER WAS

These retro-future adventure themes popped up again and again as the 20th century wore on, particularly in the genre of 1970s Cyberpunk fiction, which depicts nihilistic, high-tech outlaws on the edge of society. Author K.W. Jeter coined the term Steampunk in a 1987 letter to *Locus*, a sci-fi magazine. "Personally," wrote Jeter, "I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing. . . . Something based on the appropriate technology of the era; like 'steampunks,' perhaps."

It wasn't until 1990, when well-respected Cyberpunk scribes William Gibson and Bruce Sterling teamed up to write *The Difference Engine* (Collanz), that Steampunk was properly introduced and brought to the forefront, legitimized as a literary movement all its own that would eventually grow into something much larger. In *The Difference Engine*, Charles Babbage has invented the computer (a/k/a the "analytical engine") too early. Technically skilled "clackers" (Victorian-era hackers) program the engines with punch cards, and the suppressed revolutionaries are the Luddite anti-industrial working class. Here, the Information Age collides with the Steam Age to create something equal parts frightening and glorious, and it's within these paradoxes and purposeful anachronisms that Steampunk lives and breathes.

I half expect von Slatt to call me m'lady as he points out the rest of his projects. "What's neat about 19th-century industrial processes is that they are very accessible to tinkering," he says. "Back then, you didn't need a vapor-deposition chamber to copper-plate something. All you needed was a vat of electrolyte and a battery." During an electrolytic-etching phase one winter, von Slatt Steampunked Altoids tins, Moleskin notebooks, and even his own iPod — the stainless-steel back is decorated with an image of Lady Ada Lovelace, regarded as the first computer programmer. His larger projects dot the property around his house. An old yellow school bus he turned into "The Victorian RV" is parked in von Slatt's backyard, and a new work-in-progress, a Steampunk play house he's building for his daughters, is sitting a few feet away. He gleefully tells me about an idea he had that morning to construct a Steampunk canopy bed, though he won't reveal any specifics.

There is no typical Steampunk. Its practitioners are anyone and everyone: European re-enactors, middle-aged steam enthusiasts, carpenters, illustrators, sculptors, urban clotheshorses. "I think steam engines are beautiful," says Zachary Rukstela, a musician and industrial artist. "Steampunk was borne of the counter-culture," Maggie Killjoy, a writer, editor, and self-described "professional ex-worker," tells me. Libby Bulloff, an anachro tech-fetishist designer living in Indiana, has been attracted to "the tarnished decadence of Steampunk technology" for years. "I sort of see this as a big Venn diagram, with Steampunk as the box and a bunch of overlapping circles of interest," adds von Slatt. While Steampunks — self-

described or not — don't always see eye to eye on their metaculture's boundaries, they all have at least one crucial thing in common: a lasting, passionate fascination with Victoriana. The period roughly spans the length of Queen Victoria's rule, when early scientific discoveries thrust society headlong into the Industrial Revolution, allowing part-time craftsmen who were captivated by the means and methods behind these inventions to advance breakthroughs of their own.

The gravitational center of Steampunk is a longing for a past that never was. It was a time when a computer could indeed run on steam, when dapper gentlemen with clean shirt cuffs and pocket watches could be mad scientists by night, and when an object's uniqueness and aesthetics were just as important as its functioning guts. If you think of it as an exuberant amalgam of the modern with the 19th century, you begin to get the idea, but you're barely dipping your toe into the ocean, because Steampunk isn't merely a not-so-secret fringe culture any longer. It has developed a set of values that, for some, go deeper than a hobbyist's nostalgia for an age they weren't around to experience. The Steampunk ideology is in no way uniform — like the culture itself, it can be taken apart and put back together to suit its makers — but it seems to be ingrained in a combination of radical politics, an anti-corporate, do-it-completely-yourself ethic, and an acceptance that we are already living in the dystopian future we've been warned about.

Von Slatt compares his love for Steampunk to the popularity of stories that began with Victorian fantasy-fiction writers and continue to pop up as a constant meme in everything from Disney's adaptation of Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, to the late '60s television show *The Wild Wild West*, to role-playing games like *Forgotten Futures*, to Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* comic book. "It's the same reason why people love mash-ups: people love it when you mix their favorite things together," he says. "When the characters from *Crossing Jordan* show up on *Las Vegas*. When they have chocolate in their peanut butter. Steampunk is the same thing."

THE FICTION WE WILL BECOME

The current Steampunk Workshop, virtual and literal, started with von Slatt's Victorian RV — the 1989 Thomas Saf-T-Liner school bus he converted into a camper. Posting how-tos on a precursor to his site, he accidentally unearthed Steampunk's online community. He came into it not realizing there was an entire subculture to define both his DIY habits and the visual aesthetics he'd long appreciated. Once he launched the Workshop, visitors identified themselves much in the same way. "Again and again, people post, 'I had no idea there was a name for what I am,'" he says. "A lot of it seems to have come from the same place simultaneously, a mysterious force bringing us together."

It wasn't long after von Slatt's mods were showcased across the Internet that he became known as a leader in the Steampunk backyard-industrialist movement, a role that makes him uncomfortable. Rather, he describes himself as a connector, a sort of Steampunk dad who possesses a talent for putting movers-and-shakers in touch with each other so that big things can start to happen. When I meet him, it's a week before the

Continued from p 21 helped work on his friend Greg Jones's Burning Man festival project, for which they crafted a downscaled 16th-century Spanish galleon and plunked it on top of a school bus. Shortly thereafter, Rukstela formed KSW, which he's in the midst of turning into a nonprofit.

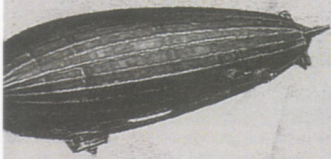
KSW debuted at Burning Man 2006 with Jamie Vaida's steam-powered Carousel, and among their many surreal and fantastic projects are Sean Orlando's Steampunk Tree House, another huge steam-powered hit at Burning Man this past August that looks like a miniaturized, darkwave version of Cinderella's castle thrown into an Edward Gorey illustration, all twisted turrets and enchanted corners.

The allure of steam as both energy source and art form is something that's not lost on Rukstela. "It's quiet, it's rhythmic, it's hot," he says. "It hisses and it's got this real organic, crocodile-brain feel to it. It's reciprocating motion, like watching a pinwheel." This summer, KSW will team up with the New York guerilla street artist and wheat-paster Swoon on the Hudson River Project. They'll spend three weeks on a sculptural flagship covered in Swoon's art, trucking across the country with an armada of junk-built steamboats. The fleet will actually sail the Hudson River in mid August, culminating with a gallery show in Brooklyn.

Orlando, a metalworker and KSW founding member who built the Tree House with the help of a Burning Man grant, shares Rukstela's obsession with steam and its aesthetic power. "With steam engines and steam boilers, the guts of the machine are on full display, and the guts are so very interesting," he says. Among his inspirations for the Steampunk Tree House were Verne, the film *City of Lost Children*, and the computer game *Myst*. "The landmarks and monuments that we have all over the world are an inspiration to me," says Orlando, naming the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, and the Taj Mahal as examples, "because they were made artistically, creatively, intelligently — and they were made to last."

THE ERA OF THE AMATEUR

The 19th century ushered in the era of the amateur: a wild-eyed tinkerer in a lab had the capacity to stumble upon a discovery that just might alter society, a common



theme paralleled in Victorian and Gothic fiction and now, in Steampunk. "I find the optimism of Steampunk rather refreshing," says Rich Nagy, a/k/a Datamancer (datamancer.net), a popular Steampunk artisan originally based in New Jersey but now living in California who was represented at the Maker Contraptor's Lounge. "Steampunk has a way of making technology, which is becoming more transparent and taken for granted every day, seem novel and fun again," adds Nagy. That much is clear in his finely wrought pieces, like the "Computational Engine" computer casemod and his sophisticated "Steampunk Victorian



STEAMPARK Seattle five-piece Abney Park claim to be the crew of an airship, *The Ophelia*.

Laptop," a Hewlett-Packard Z1000 laptop with a clockwork-under-glass display that, when it's closed, looks like an ornate antique music box. It turns on with a clock-winding key. In effect, Steampunk is poised to bring the proletariat craftsman his 21st-century renaissance.

Though Steampunk's artisanal outputs have stolen much of the mainstream lime-light so far, there is a whole other creative side to the scene that has received little attention in comparison. Countless bands have formed, filing their music under the Steampunk genre or citing Victorian fantasy as a muse. One of them, Vernian Process (gothpunk.com/formaldehyde/vernianprocess.html), is the solo project of San Francisco-based Joshua Pfeiffer. A true testament to the notion of the ambitious dabbler, Pfeiffer has no musical training, and writes songs with the aid of basic audio-production software. "The atmosphere is actually more important to me than writing good hooks, or melodic structure," he says of his music, which he makes free to download. "I feel that what I do represents the genre as I would like it to sound."

"Captain" Robert Brown is the brash leader of Abney Park (abney-park.com), a five-piece conceptual Steampunk band from Seattle that played at Maker and modifies its own instruments in the Steampunk aesthetic. Its members invented fictional back stories for themselves, claiming to be the crew of an airship named *The Ophelia*. "I think the world is tired of rock stars in \$500 pairs of jeans talking about how 'real' they are," says Brown. "I think that's the music industry's way to cover up the fact that the mainstream music they've been brass-knuckling into our eardrums is flat, lifeless, unimaginative, and boring. Steampunk is the creative mind's answer to a world that has flat-lined."



PUNK EXPRESS Steampunk magazine offers everything from intellectual essays to instructions for turning copper into brass.

FOR RICH NAGY, a/k/a Datamancer, who's laptop is pictured below, Steampunk is a way to make technology "fun again."



DATAMANCER.NET

A POST-CIVILIZED LIFE

Most modern conveniences are manufactured to be replaced. Steampunk art can be interpreted as a rebellion against soulless design, homogeny, and Wal-mart-ization. And the act of "Steampunking" the things that surround us has, for some, become a thrilling revolt against the evils of mass-production and the subsequent commercialization and commodification of every last inch of our lives. "It seems to me that we've developed into a disposable society," says KSW's Orlando. "Items are manufactured to be disposable and cheap. They're not made uniquely or to last — they're made to be affordable. Care and creativity is taken out of the process."

In addition to everything else it has the potential to do, the Steampunk scene is about DIY resourcefulness, and encourages people not to consume, but to re-use, to create, and to celebrate the advantages of the one-off. "There really is a saturation of new gadgets that are really crappy, that won't be an heirloom or anything you'll ever save," says Phil Torrone, senior editor of MAKE magazine. "I think there's a need for people to build something that will mean more to them."

For some, this translates to a deeper study of their patterns of consumption and use, and there are a number of individuals who have chosen to further unpack Steampunk until it's suspended inside of their personal philosophy. For every link to Steampunk-themed ephemera, you'll find endless debates about its boundaries and its meaning. So is it an aesthetic technological boom? A nostalgic-drenched affectation that bleeds into the neo-Weimar gothic-cabaret explosion? Or is it more — a cultural movement?

Magpie Killjoy, the pseudonym of the Portland-based publisher and founding editor of Steampunk magazine, believes Steampunk is all of those things. Although, for the "anachronistic anarchist," it's the necessary alternative to the *quid pro quo* of contemporary society. "I think Steampunk can save the world," he says. "I'm not saying it will, but I'm saying it could. Our civilization has reached its endgame, most likely, destroyed by industrialization and neo-colonialism." Killjoy lived in squats across the US and Europe for several years and discovered that, to his pleasure, Steampunk was "like punk, but with better manners." He chooses to live a thoroughly post-civilized lifestyle — as if our planet has already self-destructed. "We graywater, we compost, we garden, we dumpster and recycle all in our tiny yard in the middle of the city," he says. "Steampunk appeals to us. It encourages us to remember that technology is neither savior nor foe."

Killjoy launched Steampunk magazine in the fall of 2006, initially as a means of self-publishing one of his short stories. Four issues (not including an extra mini-issue, "The Steampunk Guide to the Apocalypse") have been published thus far, averaging 80 pages in length. The magazine offers a rich range of literary excerpts and stories by new writers, intellectual essays on the "Varieties of Steampunk Experience," and feature pieces on everything from "How To Turn Copper into Brass" to an

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BACK TALK

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Q&A WITH
MIKKO NISSINEN



ERIC ANTONIOU



PHOTO BY HOVERING

ZACHARY RUKSTELA helped design a scaled-down 16th-century Spanish galleon (above), plunked it on top of a school bus, and set sail for the 2002 Burning Man festival.

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introduction to DIY millinery. They've run interviews with up-and-coming Steampunk musicians, tech-artists, and writers like Steampunk power-couple Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, who edited a new anthology called



Steampunk (Tachyon) that will be published this June.

With the assistance of a group of writers, editors, and artists, Killjoy runs the magazine on a completely volunteer basis, and anyone can download it for free under a Creative Commons license.

Up until recently, most mainstream coverage of Steampunk has hovered on the hot novelty of hardware tech-mods created by men. Libby Bulloff, a photographer, graphic designer, and wearable-artist (exoskeletoncabaret.com) — she's now also an editor of *Steampunk* magazine — laments the fact that the women who have changed the face of Steampunk culture have often been brushed over.

"Considering how many writers, crafters, milliners, and performers of Steampunk are female, I very rarely see any of them get the attention they deserve for their work," says Bulloff. "Steampunk is feminist friendly and encourages people of many backgrounds to create, contrary to the sexism and racism of the Victorian era." She sells her colorful, futuristic hair extensions made out of tubular crin material on Etsy, and conceptualized "Pipe Dream," a Steampunk-themed solo gallery show in Indiana late this past year. "Certainly our culture is greater than one single aspect of creating."

A FABULOUS JUNKYARD OF IDEAS

Steampunks situate themselves within the movement like embroidered clusters on a gigantic swatch of fabric: part of the whole, yet very much a separate entity when cut from the source. They

would be drawing, making, creating, and DIY-ing whether or not they had found Steampunk, and they continue to do so in spite of having found it.

"Through its merging of the old and the new, Steampunk is creating the new 'new,'" says Julie Madden, director of special events at Axiom Gallery. "One might venture to say Steampunk is a new form of new-media art at its finest. . . . It is here to stay, even if only on the fringes, which is an exciting place to be."

Although the Internet has brought the various and disparate elements of Steampunk connoisseurs together, the Internet isn't Steampunk's blood — it's not even its flesh or bone. It's just a

skin that's routinely shed by the makers. Offline is where the Steampunks get their hands dirty so that the DIY ethos that defines their community can truly bloom. In an interview with *Steampunk* magazine, graphic novelist Alan Moore spoke of Steampunk as a "fabulous junkyard of ideas that may have an awful lot of life left in them." That much, at the very least, is true. Not everyone will choose to live as if Armageddon has arrived, though more

STEAMPUNK IS 'LIKE PUNK, BUT WITH BETTER MANNERS.'

than a few will take a good, long look back at what we've discarded. Von Slatt, for one, treasures these elements as a way to forward-roll into the future with grace — even if it means playing a joke on ourselves.

"I just love the idea that, 50 years from now, some little old lady will show up on *Antique Roadshow* with this, and some poor antique dealer is going to have to explain it to her," says von Slatt, holding up an aluminum telegraph sounder he designed for airship duty — an anachronism twisted into itself. He laughs, delighted. "It's fabulous, you know? Of course, the idea of a wired telegraph sounder aboard an airship is patently ridiculous. Someday, I may just take that into some large antique store and leave it on the shelf." ©

Sharon Steel dares Steve Jobs to Steampunk his MacBook Air. She can be reached at ssteel@phx.com.