



Different Engines: Alternate Steampunks

"The real Age of Steam was a specific period in Earth's history, and most steampunk is set in that period. But with more radical divergences, it's possible to imagine similar technologies in other settings"

-- William H. Stoddard, *GURPS Steampunk*, p. 11

It's not just possible -- it's downright irresistible. As a celebration of the perfected apparatus of brass gears and whirling pistons that is *GURPS Steampunk*, here are three more somewhat less-Worked Examples of vaporous alternate histories. Take a deep whiff of coal-smoke, brush back your whiskers, and let's set the ether crackling.

"The shape of the boiler having been determined at pleasure, in that part of it intended to hold the water a small chamber, perfectly air-tight, is intercepted between two perpendicular partitions. With this chamber a tube, one of those which pass under the coals, communicates near the bottom, one end of the tube being closed that no water may enter it from the boiler: the other tubes lead into the chamber where the water is. Thus when the coals are ignited they will generate steam through that tube which leads into the small chamber. This steam is carried along a tube which pierces the surface of the boiler, and through the mouth of the figure on to the coals, (for the figure must be bent so as to blow downwards;) and as steam is always being generated, the figure is always blowing. The steam is generated from the fire, and, if we pour a very small quantity of water into the small chamber, we shall produce more steam, and the figure, blowing with great violence, will heat the boiler still higher."

-- Hero of Alexandria, *Pneumatica*, LXXIV

Was it the patronage of the priests of Hephaistos, still influential in Egypt in honor of Alexander's lost love Hephaestion? Was it the desperate eagerness of General Vespasian to find something, anything, that would batter down the infernally stubborn walls of Jerusalem? Was it simply a case of academic politics going right for a change? Whatever the reason, Hero received a munificent grant for his own Museum, charged with developing Ktesibos' 200-year old design for compressed-air cannon for the Roman legions. Joining experimental petroleum boilers to machined bronze, and using his own aeolipile as a steam engine to power the device, Hero watched his "Aeolian onager" smash Masada to powder at ranges far beyond what rope and sinew could achieve. Before his death, he had also invented aeolibosae ("Aeolian oxen") to drag the infernal devices across the Rhine and Danube to smash the Germans and Dacians, and "aeolicthyne" ships which could cross the Mediterranean in record time. Trajan conquered the petroleum fields of Mesopotamia and Persia, ensuring the Empire of an unbroken supply of the "Aeolian fluid". During the plagues under Marcus Aurelius, Aeolian engines sowed and reaped the crops, replacing the decimated peasantry.

Now, in 180 A.D., Marcus Aurelius' son Commodus takes the throne of an Empire that stretches from the misty Insulae Hesperes in the west to the borders of India, linked by Aeolian-graded roads, defended by aeolipilum-wielding mechanized legions, and driven by the cthonian petroleum pumps of Babylon. Aeolicar battles in the Colosseum feed the crowd's frenzy, and make millions for patrician owners and their Egyptian engineers. The plebeian "charioteers," however, may want

a piece of the action -- and they may not care how they get it. This **GURPS Steampunk-Imperial Rome-Autoduel** campaign can center on rebel Aeolicar fighters battling it out in the arena, dueling on behalf of their patrons on the wide highways of the Empire, or rising up against Commodus' mad attempts to control all Aeolian technology for himself. PCs can be Roman mobile infantry fighting a blitzkrieg in India, street gangs in Rome or Alexandria rumbling over turf, noble conspirators against the mad and decadent Commodus -- or, of course, greasy-haired punks racing and dueling Aeolicars, playing that new-fangled Nubian music, and being hassled by the vigiles. Hey, pater-o! Wanna drag?

"The attraction of a magnet for iron is like that of amber for the smallest grain of mustard seed. It is like a breath of wind which mysteriously penetrates through both, and communicates itself with the speed of an arrow."

-- Kuo Fu (4th century AD)

The Chinese had magnetic compasses as early as the 3rd millennium B.C. They had lightning rods and understood the interrelationship between amber, metals, and electricity in the late Han era of Kuo Fu. By the turn of the first millennium A.D., they had invented the blast furnace, and produced over 35,000 tons of steel annually from coke-burning smelters. All the Song Dynasty needed was a little spark. During the wide-ranging reforms of the minister Wang Anshi in the 1060s, the mandarin state was in turmoil, and new ideas rose to the fore without obstruction. From a mixture of Taoist alchemy, magnetism, and astronomy came the first electric batteries and dynamos. After Wang Anshi's personal acupuncturist used the new devices to cure the Emperor Zhenxong's near-fatal illness of 1085, no bureaucrat could stop the electrical revolution. Coke-fired electrical motors soon powered weapons factories and shipyards across the Empire, putting guns and rockets into the hands of the entire army. The northern barbarians fell back, then offered tribute -- a brief and pointless rebellion in 1206 by a minor Mongol khan named Temujin was easily crushed by repeater-armed Song troops lifted in by electric gliders.

Shen Yu's improved astronomical techniques, and the insights of Taoist philosophers, led to the discovery of the *tian-qi* (or, as the newly translated Greek scrolls taken from Central Asia called it, the "ether") that joined all the stars and planets together. The first *tian-qi* ships reached the Moon in 1247 (after a brief expedition around the world to gather tribute from lesser monarchs), and skimmed the clouds of the inner world *Taibaixing* two years later. In 1254, Imperial canal-builders arrived on the red planet *Yinghuo* to study its canal network; they became the nexus of a thriving trade entrepot for rare metals, mysterious herbs, and finely worked silicates and ceramics. PCs in this **GURPS Steampunk-China** campaign can be Western traders (perhaps including a young Marco Polo) trying any angle to break into the Electrical-Celestial Empire's economy, Imperial mandarins keeping watch on the planetary frontiers (the tall, inscrutable people of *Yinghuo* are rumored to possess subtle mental powers and strange combat techniques), or explorers seeking new adventures under Heaven.

"[T]he old energy of the Norse race arms itself with these magnificent powers; new men prove an over-match for the land-owner, and the mill buys out the castle. Scandinavian Thor, who once forged his bolts in icy Hecla, and built galleys by lonely fiords; in England, has advanced with the times, has shorn his beard, enters Parliament, sits down at a desk in the India House, and lends Miollnir to Birmingham for a steam-hammer."

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*

It only took forty years of inhumanly patient tinkering, in his forge-hall below Gotland, but Durin Redbeard had done it -- taken the human Roger Bacon's airy theological notions of a steam-driven engine and brought it into the real world of iron and brass and coal. As always, if you want something done right, you're better off asking a dwarf. And, although the new steam engines helped Sweden's mills and shipyards prosper, King Magnus II seemed unable to grasp that basic principle no matter how many times dwarvish silver bailed him out. So, rewrite the constitution in 1359 to give dwarves a majority on the Riskdag. Dwarvish steamships swept the Baltic clear of Danish ships in 1370, and the dwarf-lords got positions in the Hanseatic League in return -- after

only two human generations (at compound interest), the dwarves wound up running the German economy. No problem -- lots of coal in Germany. Once the dwarves applied their engineering proclivities to tactics, the Germans even made decent fighters, wheeling and firing the new explosive-powder rifled flintlocks in clockwork fashion. Of course, you had to have dwarven commanders for the units, or the Germans would fall to fighting each other over who was pope or something equally foolish. Not as foolish as starting a whole war over roses, though -- that, you had to leave to the English. All that ruckus interfered with orderly business, had to land some Germans and some cannon off the new ironclads and bombard London, teach them how things work. Put Henry Percy on the throne, from a good Northumberland family, go back a long way with dwarves, they do. Have to put off straightening out this mess in Italy for awhile, though -- word has it there's gold just lying around to be taken in the new lands to the west.

In this Renaissance-era ***GURPS Steampunk-Fantasy Folk*** campaign, the dwarves have a racial Gadgeteering proclivity, long lives, and a newly-aggressive attitude toward cleaning up an untidy Europe. Renaissance humanity's reaction to being the colonial subjects and economic underlings of saga-spawned surly steam-lords can drive a game of comical neo-Pratchettian misadventure, or one of "rapierpunk" action as "Leonardo the Tall" leads a network of resistance gadgeteers in the name of Humanitas. Introducing human ritual magic, or American elves, or a dwarvish civil war can stir things up even more. Heigh-ho!

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Article publication date: November 24, 2000

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