

Guidelines on Worldbuilding: An Introduction

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Here are questions I ask students to respond to before we began the worldbuilding phase of *Steampunk Rochester*.

We read

- a series of steampunk short stories and talked about the prominent features of the genre;
- a broad history about the early 20th century in the United States and had a guest lecture from a History professor who specializes in local history;
- excerpts from RIT's institutional history from its founding to the 1930s

In order to make sure they understood the time period, genre, and how their peers were making sense of the material, I asked them to reflect on the following questions:

- Characterize in a few sentences what you feel the most important developments were for the Industrial Era in the United States. How was it different from the Civil War Era before it? What was being lost or left behind? What was changing? Was being created? What did society seem to value at this time? How does it connect to the coming Progressive Era?
- In the same manner, characterize in a few sentences what you feel the most important developments were in the Progressive Era in the United States. How was it different from the Industrial Era? What was being lost or left behind? What was changing? What was being created? What did society seem to value at this time? How does it connect to the Roaring Twenties and Great Depression?
- Characterize in a few sentences how the Rochester Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute (RAMI) fits into this period of history. What were its goals? Who were they trying to serve? What were its challenges?

From there, we began collaboratively writing a metanarrative, or a story of the world, that was primarily based on facts from our local history, but infused with the speculative element of steampunk technologies. Some of the questions we grappled with as we wrote were:

- What kind of steampunk technologies would this society have produced? What specific needs or problems would those technologies have attempted to address? How would they have influenced, or been influenced by, contemporary social structures of the 1920s as they pertained to gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation?
- Who would be the stakeholders in the development of new steampunk technologies? Where would the funding come from for research and development, and who would have benefitted the most from certain technological innovations?

Variations of this process can be used for virtually any location and for any specific time period, including futuristic visions of our world. The most critical part of the process is getting students to understand the complexity of a society at any given point in time, and how there are a range of social forces always at play that impact individual members of the society. It also helps to get them thinking about how technology both influences, and is influenced by, both the values and biases of that society.

Writing the metanarrative is a collaborative effort that is best done on a wiki or using document sharing software, such as Google Docs. The metanarrative will go through many major revisions before settling into a final form. Using online tools allows all the students to participate in the evolution of the metanarrative as well as track the revisions. In the end, the metanarrative becomes a complex document that each student has a vested interest in. It's a great starting point for all kinds of other storytelling projects.