

Feature



Steam Wars Sillof

Steampunk has progressed way beyond adapting Victorian fashions to the Age of Steam. To prove it, a master customizer shows how he applied the same design principals to costumes of a sci-fi movie classic. Costumers can use this approach to bring other genres into the Steampunk world.

I hold multiple history degrees and am a big fan of history and old looking things, especially industrial clunky Victorian things. I also love sci-fi and movies. The production design of certain movies always fascinated me. I love the Steampunk feel. It's a perfect blend of my interests; antique, yet futuristic.

My passion for collecting Star Wars action figures also sparked my interest in customizing, and inspired one of my first



custom Steampunk lines. I have no formal art training. This is just a hobby that I do to relax. If something turns out well, it is just from years of practice, or luck. I made figures long before Hasbro brought back their Star Wars lines, but I didn't like it when they released a figure I had made. So my customizing choices began to drift from the mainstream to the more eclectic.

I began redesigning the Star Wars galaxy in an antiquated Victorian style. I love the clunky old-fashioned look of the industrial era. It is kind of Steampunk, but not really, which is why I changed the name of the line to "*Steam Wars*". It was influenced by Jules Verne, HG Wells, Terry Gilliam, Guillermo Del Toro, etc., but I feel it has my own unique sensibilities.

I am not a fan of Steampunk movies per say, or even books for that matter, even though I am a huge movie fan and teach a

What is Customizing?

Customizing is the art of transforming toy dolls and figures into representations of sci-fi, fantasy, and comic book characters. Customizers use various tools and materials to carve, build up, and clothe their characters.

They show off their work at semi-annual virtual conventions known as [CustomCons](#), which are inspired by presentations of new products by commercial manufacturers at Toy Fairs and other trade shows. Customizers present their latest creations and recipes as if unveiling a new line of real toys to retailers.

class on film. I just love the aesthetic and feel of the era.

Design and Construction

I started on the sketches for these figures in 2006 and completed them in 2007, but held off releasing the figures until they were unveiled at [CustomCon XIX](#) in 2008 (see sidebar above). The line spans from "*A New Hope*" to "*Return of the Jedi*"

I begin by visualizing a general idea. I am always going for a figure that is very unique, yet recognizable as the intended character. Then I concentrate on the key elements that make the character

recognizable. These are the elements I will try to represent in the new figure.

I used to spend time adhering to the traditional looks of characters. But, over time I found that creating my own designs was much more rewarding and added a creative step or two that I love. I put a lot of thought in the right balance of keeping them recognizable and also doing something new that is my own. Most of it comes from my knowledge of history and any film production designs that may have leaked into my subconscious.

Next I do a few sketches; some wild brainstorms, others a little more practical with regard to parts I could find and things I could make. My drawing skills are limited and I have never taken any art classes. I often use an Excel spreadsheet full of ideas and concepts that are just lists of words.

I should make it clear that I do not dress up or make costumes. I started off making replica props. My dad was a machinist and it was something we did together. But I have never done anything full-scale, although some people have made costumes based off my designs, with my approval, and appeared at cons and festivals, which is flattering.

Once I collect spare parts, I begin construction with a fair amount of sanding, and Dremeling, and cutting. I sculpt onto the parts, like a skeleton, my own designs using epoxy sculpting compound, and glue any number of odds and ends to the figure. Then

I paint the figure and give it a wash of diluted dark paint to antique it."

Costuming Examples

Here are example characters to help costumers understand my approach. See rotating 360° versions of the *New Hope* images on my [Steam Wars](#) web page.

Luke Skywalker (New Hope)

I took Luke's humble farmer origins and modified them for a more industrial age. I went for a look that was kind of factory worker/pilot feel. The lightsaber connects via tubes to a power pack.



Obi-Wan Kenobi (New Hope)

With Ben, I went for a more traditional European knight, rather than the Asian samurai robes. I wanted his head to look like a guy who had been hiding out and keeping low. I also wanted it to have the feel of an elderly warrior who put on his old armor for one last adventure. I wanted a thinner body, kind of Don Quixote-esque. I thought the antique armor worked as the Jedi are established as an ancient and dead order.



I gave the armor the riveted Steampunk feel. I also made it look old, tarnished, and little rusty. I tried to evoke the brown Jedi

robes with the shoulder pauldrons and waist tunic, which also gave the armor a ceremonial feel. The lightsaber is connected to a power pack like Luke's.

Princess Leia (*New Hope*)

Rather than the fairy princess, I went for the leader of a rebellion. When I think of a 1700's revolutionary woman, I think of the famous Romantic painting of Lady Liberty leading the French into battle.



Han Solo (*New Hope*)

Han Solo is still the cocky smuggler pilot, but I played up the smuggler with a pirate feel. Rather than a spaceship now he pilots a large dirigible-like airship. I added the classic Steampunk goggles to the smug grinning face. I tried to keep the classic black, cream, & blue color scheme. I finished him off with a clunky modified pistol.



Darth Vader (*New Hope*)

I stripped away the samurai influence on Vader. In the films Tarkin calls him "Lord Vader", I used that line as inspiration for his look. My imperials are meant to have that Eastern European/German feel that the film's Imperials somewhat had. Vader's flared out helmet is no longer a samurai look but now a more Prussian spiked helmet. A modified gas mask replaces his fierce angular facemask. The dark patina chest armor is homage to his classic shiny black armor. The clunky lightsaber is connected to a power pack via the tube.



Gran Moff Tarkin (*New Hope*)

With Tarkin I wanted a tall thin Eastern European officer look. I added traditional medals in place of the classic red and blue squares. I added the epaulettes and ropes to complete the look.



Yoda (*Empire Strikes Back*)

Yoda was the most challenging figure in this line. He had to be Yoda-esque but not too much. I did not want to do robes, as the line is more urban European than ancient Asian. I had the idea of a kind of homeless professor type, that young Luke might find in back alley of some far off urban industrial city. Also, in my earlier [Revision line](#) I had simply put Yoda in a similar costume to my Obi Wan.



While I liked that concept at the time, I wanted a more unique look for Yoda this time. My favorite parts of the figure would be the details like the patches, pocket watch, and over dirty look of the Jedi master.

Boba Fett (*Empire Strikes Back*)

Everyone's favorite bounty hunter is always a tough design. His leg and forearm armor has an ornate feel, but the chest armor has a more riveted industrial feel. While Fett's "T" visor is iconic, this design keeps the look of the rounder goggles that have become a staple of the line, while the red strip down the middle hints at the old "T" design. His forearm weapons feature a mini-crossbow and a working retractable blade. The Surcoat is reminiscent of Fett's shoulder cape. His rocket pack is still there just in a larger more industrial model.



Lando Calrissian (*Empire Strikes Back*)

The smooth gentleman gambler has been transformed into his Victorian double. Keeping the classic blue, orange, and black color scheme but applying it to a formal jacket, vest, and dress shirt, which are more traditional of the era.



Jedi Luke Skywalker (*Return of the Jedi*)

Attempting to rekindle the order of Jedi, but fighting his own dark inner demons, is Jedi Luke Skywalker. This version of Luke is more mature and intimidating than his “A New Hope” incarnation. The look was achieved by using the idea of the Obi-Wan armor as a starting point and adding darker elements and the raised hood, like the cloak worn in the films. His lightsaber has the cohesive feel of the others in the line so far.



Admiral Ackbar (*Return of the Jedi*)

The clever crustacean who leads the rebellion against the Empire, always on the lookout for a trap, features a classic naval admiral uniform in the color scheme of the film character. His crablike pincers, golden epaulets, and knee-high stockings capture the look of a bygone era. I could not resist doing the pincers.



X-Wing Pilot Wedge Antilles (Return of the Jedi)

The backbone of the Rebellion is the fearless pilots of the X-wing Bi-plane. Decked out in his orange jumpsuit, and chest air box (similar to those of the imperial pilots) and domed helmet for maneuvers that take him up the upper reaches of the *Æther*.

Wedge's head comes off and can be replaced with my *A New Hope* Luke's head for Luke in X-Wing pilot outfit.



Jabba the Hutt (Return of the Jedi)

This grotesque godfather rules the streets and back alleys with a sweaty, bloated, iron fist. The look of the nefarious crime boss was modified heavily. He is a fusion of the memorable space slug and his deleted human alter ego. The winged back chair barely contains the massive frame of this cigar smoking Mafioso.



Slave Leia (Return of the Jedi)

Suspended from a pipe is Jabba's most recent acquisition, Slave Leia. Her classic gold bikini has been replaced with a corset and half dress. The color scheme is the same but now she is suspended from a pipe attached to Jabba's chair. She was not originally in my plans for the line, but I was convinced by a friend to put her in as well.



Sillof is the pseudonym of an Indiana high school teacher, filmmaker and writer, to conceal his true calling from his students. His legendary Steampunk and Gaslamp creations were recently featured in Star Wars Insider Magazine. Visit [Sillof's Workshop](#) to see more of his work. Photos and designs copyright Sillof, all rights reserved.