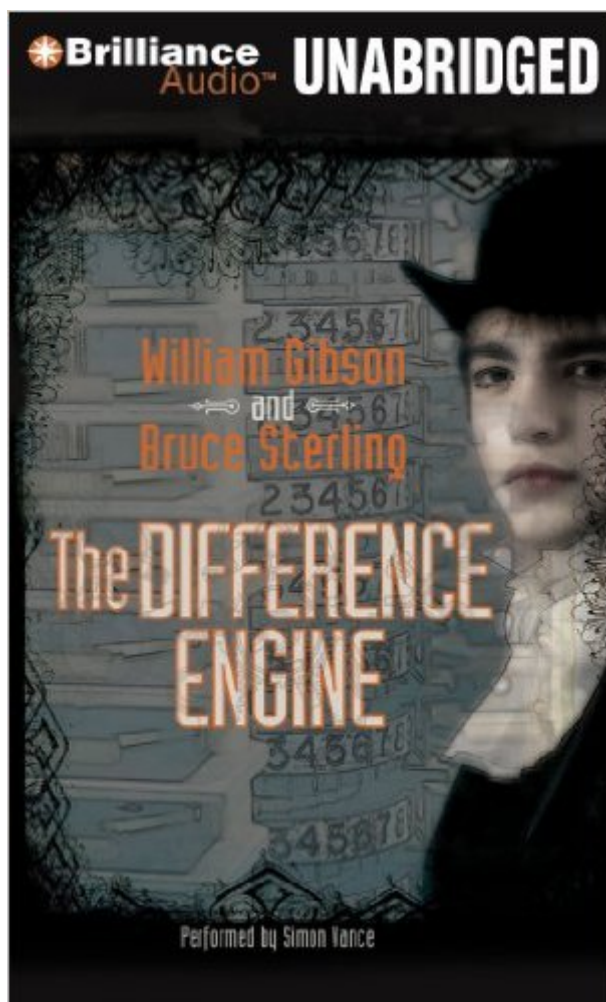


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# The Difference Engine



## Synopsis

1855: The Industrial Revolution is in full swing, powered by steam-driven cybernetic Engines. Charles Babbage perfects his Analytical Engine, and the computer age arrives a century ahead of its time. Three extraordinary characters race toward a rendezvous with the future: Sybil Gerard • fallen woman, politician's tart, daughter of a Luddite agitator; Edward • Leviathan • Mallory • explorer and paleontologist; Laurence Oliphant • diplomat, mystic, and spy. Their adventure begins with the discovery of a box of punched Engine cards of unknown origin and purpose. Cards someone wants badly enough to kill for. Part detective story, part historical thriller, The Difference Engine took the science fiction community by storm when it was first published more than twenty years ago. Provocative, compelling, and intensely imagined, this novel is poised to impress a whole new generation.

## Book Information

Audio CD

Publisher: Brilliance Audio; Library edition (November 6, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9781441890740

ISBN-13: 978-1441890740

ASIN: 1441890742

Product Dimensions: 7.1 x 1 x 6.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.0 out of 5 stars • See all reviews • (172 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #13,031,821 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #21 in Books > Books on CD >

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Fantasy

## Customer Reviews

I don't want to give away too much of the plot, but I think I have to reveal a little to counter the bad reviews. I hate to think that people who might enjoy this book as much as I did will miss out on it because of what they've read here. If you don't like SF books that aren't tightly character and plot-driven, this one isn't for you. But the book does have a plot, and I think those who say that it's muddled, or ends in mid-story just didn't get it. This book is about the genesis of the first AI in an alternate history, in which the historical leaps in computer technology take place in a

post-Napoleonic Britain where meritocracy and rationalism have triumphed over aristocracy. The authors were not trying to develop this idea by focusing on plot and character and indeed the AI itself is largely absent. The focus is instead on the alternate society from which the AI comes. The authors introduce a number of equally weighted plot elements, which are indeed low-key and inconclusive. But two of these meandering elements of the plot are, by the end, shown to be significant. One involves the invention of a computer system so complex that an unavoidable randomness is introduced into its calculation of data. The other involves the rationalist government's internal security technocrats, who, in the style of their twentieth century counterparts in actual history, base their philosophy on mass information - by trying to construct a database of the personal details of all their citizens. Far from finishing in mid-story, the book reaches its natural conclusion when these two plot elements are brought together. That last chapter, with the "shadowy character", shows us a point in the future in which the result of their union finally comes to fruition.

An enviable array of critical raves lines the first few pages of *The Difference Engine*, including this one from director Ridley Scott: "A visionary steam-powered heavy metal fantasy! Gibson and Sterling create a high Victorian virtual reality of extraordinary richness and detail." In this novel Gibson teams up with Bruce Sterling, a brilliant sci-fi writer himself, to provide an amazing picture of Victorian England. Both writers are notable for their attention to detail, and their combined effort teems with thousands of minutiae from the period, not to mention large themes based on the Victorian preoccupation with such things as science, technology, exploration, and steam. The novel belongs to a particular genre of science fiction called alternate history, where the writer answers the question, if such-and-such had happened (or never happened), what would the world be like now? *The Difference Engine* tries to imagine what the world would be like if the computer had been invented 100 years earlier. It is set in England in 1855. Sci-fi pundits have dubbed the novel "steampunk" because those who control the steam-driven computers control society. The structure of the novel falls into three discreet, self-contained units all concerned with a case full of rare and valuable computer cards. In the first part, Sybil Gerard, a fallen woman, inherits the cards from her boyfriend, who was murdered for them. In the long middle section Edward "Leviathan" Mallory, a scientist famous for his discovery of the Brontosaurus, takes charge of them next. And in the conclusion Lawrence Oliphant, a gentleman detective with advanced syphilis, finally solves the mystery of their whereabouts. Alternate history writers love to recast famous figures in altered roles.

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