

2019 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer Finalist

uncanny



Fandom for Robots

A short story by

Vina Jie-Min Prasad

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Computron feels no emotion towards the animated television show titled *Hyperdimension Warp Record* (超次元 ワープ レコード). After all, Computron does not have any emotion circuits installed, and is thus constitutionally incapable of experiencing “excitement,” “hatred,” or “frustration.” It is completely impossible for Computron to experience emotions such as “excitement about the seventh episode of *HyperWarp*,” “hatred of the anime’s short episode length” or “frustration that Friday is so far away.”

Computron checks his internal chronometer, as well as the countdown page on the streaming website. There are twenty-two hours, five minutes, forty-six seconds, and twelve milliseconds until 2 am on Friday (Japanese Standard Time). Logically, he is aware that time is most likely passing at a normal rate. The Simak Robotics Museum is not within close proximity of a black hole, and there is close to no possibility that time is being dilated. His constant checking of the chronometer to compare it with the countdown page serves no scientific purpose whatsoever.

After fifty milliseconds, Computron checks the countdown page again.



The Simak Robotics Museum’s commemorative postcard set (\$15.00 for a set of twelve) describes Computron as “The only known sentient robot, created in 1954 by Doctor Karel Alquist to serve as a laboratory assistant. No known scientist has managed to recreate the doctor’s invention. Its steel-framed box-and-claw design is characteristic of the period.” Below that, in smaller print, the postcard thanks the Alquist estate for their generous donation.

In the museum, Computron is regarded as a quaint artefact, and plays a key role in the *Robotics Then and Now* performance as an example of the “Then.” After the announcer’s introduction to robotics, Computron appears on stage, answers four standard queries from the audience as proof of his sentience, and steps off the stage to make way for the rest of the performance, which ends with the android-bodied automaton TETSUCHAN showcasing its ability to breakdance.

Today’s queries are likely to be similar to the rest. A teenage girl waves at the announcer and receives the microphone.

“Hi, Computron. My question is... have you watched anime before?”

[Yes,] Computron vocalises. [I have viewed the works of the renowned actress Anna May Wong. Doctor Alquist enjoyed her movies as a child.]

“Oh, um, not that,” the girl continues. “I meant Japanese animation. Have you ever watched this show called *Hyperdimension Warp Record*?”

[I have not.]

“Oh, okay, I was just thinking that you really looked like one of the characters. But since you haven’t, maybe you could give *HyperWarp* a shot! It’s really good, you might like it! There are six episodes out so far, and you can watch it on—”

The announcer cuts the girl off, and hands the microphone over to the next querent, who has a question about Doctor Alquist’s research. After answering two more standard queries, Computron returns to his storage room to answer his electronic mail, which consists of queries from elementary school students. He picks up two metal styluses, one in each of his grasping claws, and begins tapping them on the computing unit’s keyboard, one key at a time. Computron explains the difference between a robot and an android to four students, and provides the fifth student with a hyperlink to Daniel Clement Dennett III’s writings on consciousness.

As Computron readies himself to enter sleep mode, he recalls the teenage girl’s request that he “give *HyperWarp* a shot.” It is only logical to research the Japanese animation *Hyperdimension Warp Record* in order to address queries from future visitors. The title, when entered into a search engine on the World Wide Web, produces about 957,000 results (0.27 seconds).

Computron manoeuvres the mouse pointer to the third hyperlink, which offers to let him “watch Hyperdimension Warp Record FULL episodes streaming online high quality.” From the still image behind the prominent “play” button, the grey boxy figure standing beside the large-eyed blue-haired human does bear an extremely slight resemblance to Computron’s design. It is only logical to press the “play” button on the first episode, in order to familiarise himself with recent discourse about robots in popular culture.

The series’ six episodes are each approximately 25 minutes long. Between watching the series, viewing the online bulletin boards, and perusing the extensively footnoted fan encyclopedia, Computron does not enter sleep mode for ten hours, thirty-six minutes, two seconds, and twenty milliseconds.



Hyperdimension Warp Record (超次元 ワープ レコード Chōjigen Wāpu Rekōdo, literal translation: *Super Dimensional Warp Record*) is a Japanese anime series set in space in the far future. The protagonist, Ellison, is an escapee from a supposedly inescapable galactic prison. Joined by a fellow escapee, Cyro (short for Cybernetic Robot), the two make their way across the galaxy to seek revenge. The targets of their revenge are the Seven Sabers of Paradise, who have stolen the hyperdimensional warp unit from Cyro’s creator and caused the death of Ellison’s entire family.

Episode seven of *HyperWarp* comes with the revelation that the Second Saber, Ellison’s identical twin, had murdered their parents before faking her own death. After Cyro and Ellison return to the *Kosmogram*, the last segment of the episode unfolds without dialogue. There is a slow pan across the spaceship’s control area, revealing that Ellison has indulged in the human pastime known as “crying” before falling asleep in the

captain’s chair. His chest binder is stained with blood from the wound on his collarbone. Cyro reaches over, gently using his grabbing claw to loosen Ellison’s binder, and drapes a blanket over him. An instrumental version of the end theme plays as Cyro gets up from his seat, making his way to the recharging bay at the back of the ship. From the way his footfalls are animated, it is clear that Cyro is trying his best to avoid making any noise as he walks.

The credits play over a zoomed-out shot of the *Kosmogram* making its way to the next exoplanet, a tiny pinpoint of bright blue in the vast blackness of space.

The preview for the next episode seems to indicate that the episode will focus on the Sabers’ initial attempt to activate the hyperdimensional warp unit. There is no mention of Cyro or Ellison at all.

During the wait for episode eight, Computron discovers a concept called “fanfiction.”



While “fanfiction” is meant to consist of “fan-written stories about characters or settings from an original work of fiction,” Computron observes that much of the *HyperWarp* fanfiction bears no resemblance to the actual characters or setting. For instance, the series that claims to be a “spin-off focusing on Powerful!Cyro” seems to involve Cyro installing many large-calibre guns onto his frame and joining the Space Marines, which does not seem relevant to his quest for revenge or the retrieval of the hyperdimensional warp unit. Similarly, the “high school fic” in which Cyro and Ellison study at Hyperdimension High fails to acknowledge the fact that formal education is reserved for the elite class in the *HyperWarp* universe.

Most of the fanfiction set within the actual series seems particularly inaccurate. The most recent offender is EllisonsWife’s “Rosemary for

Remembrance,” which fails to acknowledge the fact that Cyro does not have human facial features, and thus cannot “touch his nose against Ellison’s hair, breathing in the scent of sandalwood, rosemary, and something uniquely him” before “kissing Ellison passionately, needily, hungrily, his tongue slipping into Ellison’s mouth.”

Computron readies his styluses and moves the cursor down to the comment box, prepared to leave anonymous “constructive criticism” for EllisonsWife, when he detects a comment with relevant keywords.

bjornruffian:

Okay, I’ve noticed this in several of your fics and I was trying not to be too harsh, but when it got to the kissing scene I couldn’t take it anymore. Cyro can’t touch his nose against anything, because he doesn’t have a nose! Cyro can’t slip his tongue into anyone’s mouth, because he doesn’t have a tongue! Were we even watching the same series?? Did you skip all the parts where Cyro is a metal robot with a cube-shaped head?!

EllisonsWife:

Who are you, the fandom police?? I’m basing Cyro’s design on this piece of fanart ([link here](#)) because it looks better than a freakin metal box!! Anyway, I put DON’T LIKE DON’T READ in the author’s notes!!! If you hate the way I write them so much, why don’t you just write your own????

Computron is incapable of feeling hatred for anything, as that would require Doctor Alquist to have installed emotion circuits during his creation.

However, due to Computron’s above-average procedural knowledge, he is capable of following the directions to create an account on [fanficarchive.org](#).



...and Ellison manoeuvred his flesh hands in a claw-like motion, locking them with Cyro’s own grasping claws. His soft human body

pressed against the hard lines of Cyro’s proprietary alloy, in a manner which would have generated wear and tear had Cyro’s body not been of superior make. Fluids leaked from Ellison’s eyes. No fluids leaked from Cyro’s ocular units, but...

Comments (3)

DontGotRhythm:

What the hell? Have you ever met a human? This reads like an alien wrote it.

tattered_freedom_wings:

uhhh this is kinda weird but i think i liked it?? not sure about the box thing though

bjornruffian:

OH MY GODDDD. :DDDD Finally, someone who doesn’t write human-shaped robot-in-name-only Cyro! Some of Ellison’s characterisation is a little awkward—I don’t think he would say all that mushy stuff about Cyro’s beautiful boxy shape??—but I love your Cyro! If this is just your first fic, I can’t wait for you to write more!!



Computron has been spending less time in sleep mode after Episode Thirteen’s cliffhanger, and has spent his time conducting objective discussions about *HyperWarp*’s appeal with commenters on various video streaming sites and anonymous message boards.

As he is about to reply to the latest missive about his lack of genitalia and outside social activities, which is technically correct, his internal chronometer indicates that it is time for the *Robotics Then and Now* performance.

“So, I was wondering, have you ever watched *Hyperdimension Warp Record*? There’s this character called Cyro that—”

[Yes, I am aware of *HyperWarp*,] Computron says. [I have taken the “How To Tell If Your Life Is *HyperWarp*” quiz online, and it has indicated

that I am “a Hyper-Big *HyperWarp* Fan!” I have repeatedly viewed the scene between Ellison and Cyro at the end of Episode Seven, and recently I have left a “like” on bjornruffian’s artwork of what may have happened shortly after that scene, due to its exceptional accuracy. The show is widely regarded as “this season’s sleeper hit” and has met with approval from a statistically significant number of critics. If other members of the audience wish to view this series, there are thirteen episodes out so far, and they can be viewed on—] The announcer motions to him, using the same gesture she uses when audience members are taking too long to talk. Computron falls silent until the announcer chooses the next question, which is also the last due to time constraints.

After TETSUCHAN has finished its breakdance and showcased its newly-programmed ability to pop-and-lock, the announcer speaks to Computron backstage. She requests that he take less time for the question-and-answer segment in the future.

[Understood,] Computron says, and returns to his storage room to check his inbox again.



Private Message from bjornruffian:

Hi RobotFan,

I noticed you liked my art (thanks!) and you seem to know a LOT about robots judging from your fic (and, well, your name). I’m doing a fancomic about Ellison and Cyro being stranded on one of the desert-ish exoplanets while they try to fix the *Kosmogram*, but I want to make sure I’m drawing Cyro’s body right. Are there any references you can recommend for someone who’s looking to learn more about robots? Like, the classic kind, not the android kind? It’d be great if they’re available online, especially if they have pictures—I’ve found some books with photos but they’re WAAAY more than I can afford :\\\

Thank you for any help you can offer! I'm really looking forward to your next fic!



Shortly after reading bjornruffian's message, Computron visits the Early Robotics section of the museum. It has shrunk significantly over the years, particularly after the creation of the "Redefining Human," "Androids of the Future," and "Drone Zone" sections. It consists of several information panels, a small collection of tin toys, and the remnants of all three versions of Hexode the robot.

In Episode 14 of *Hyperdimension Warp Record*, Cyro visits a deserted exoplanet alone to investigate the history of the hyperdimension warp drive, and finds himself surrounded by the deactivated bodies of robots of similar make, claws outstretched, being slowly ground down by the gears of a gigantic machine. The "Robot Recycler" scene is frequently listed as one of that year's top ten most shocking moments in anime.

On 7 June 1957, the third version of Hexode fails Doctor Alquist's mirror test for the hundredth time, proving that it has no measurable self-awareness. Computron watches Doctor Alquist smash the spanner against Hexode's face, crumpling its nose and lips. Oil leaks from its ocular units as it falls to the floor with a metallic thud. Its vocal synthesiser crackles and hisses.

"You godforsaken tin bucket," Doctor Alquist shouts. "To hell with you." If Doctor Alquist were to raise the spanner to Computron, it is likely that Doctor Alquist will not have an assistant for any future robotics experiments. Computron stays still, standing in front of the mirror, silently observing the destruction of Hexode so he can gather up its parts later.

When Computron photographs Hexode's display case, he is careful to avoid capturing any part of himself in the reflection.



[bjornruffian] Oh man, thank you SO MUCH for installing chat just for this! Anyway, I really appreciate your help with the script so far (I think we can call it a collab by this point?). And thanks for the exhibit photos! Was it a lot of trouble? I checked the website and that museum is pretty much in the middle of nowhere...

—File Transfer of “THANK YOU ROBOTFAN.png” from “bjornruffian” started.

—File Transfer of “THANK YOU ROBOTFAN.png” from “bjornruffian” finished.

[bjornruffian] So I’ve got a few questions about page 8 in the folder I shared, can you take a look at the second panel from the top? I figured his joint would be all gummed up by the sand, so I thought I’d try to do an X-ray view thing as a closeup... if you have any idea how the circuits are supposed to be, could you double-check?

[bjornruffian] Okay, you’re taking really long to type, this is making me super nervous I did everything wrong :\\

[RobotFan] Apologies

[RobotFan] I

[RobotFan] Am not fast at typing

[bjornruffian] Okaaay, I’ll wait on the expert here

[RobotFan] The circuit is connected incorrectly and the joint mechanism is incorrect as well

[bjornruffian] Ughhhhh I knew it was wrong!! DDD:

[bjornruffian] I wish the character sheets came with schematics or something, I’ve paused the flashback scenes with all the failed robots like ten billion times to take screenshots >:\\

[RobotFan] Besides the scenes in Episode 14, there are other shots of Cyro’s schematics in Episode 5 (17:40:18 and 20:13:50) as well as Episode 12 (08:23:14)

—File Transfer of “schematic-screenshots.zip” from “RobotFan” started.

—File Transfer of “schematic-screenshots.zip” from “RobotFan” finished.

[bjornruffian] THANK YOU

[bjornruffian] I swear you’re some sort of angel or something

[RobotFan] That is incorrect

[RobotFan] I am merely a robot



There are certain things in the museum’s storage room that would benefit bjornruffian’s mission of completing her Cyro/Ellison comic. Computron and Hexode’s schematics are part of the Alquist Collection, which is not a priority for the museum’s digitisation project due to a perceived lack of value. As part of the Alquist Collection himself, there should be no objection to Computron retrieving the schematics.

As Computron grasps the doorknob with his left claw, he catches a glimpse of Cyro from Episode 15 in the door’s glass panels, his ocular units blazing yellow with determination after overcoming his past. In fan parlance, this is known as Determined!Cyro, and has only been seen during fight scenes thus far. It is illogical to have Determined!Cyro appear in this context, or in this location.

Computron looks at the dusty glass again, and sees only a reflection of his face.



[RobotFan] I have a large file to send to you

[RobotFan] To be precise, four large files

[RobotFan] The remaining three will be digitised and sent at a later date

—File Transfer of “alquist-archive-scans-pt1.zip” from “RobotFan” started.

—File Transfer of “alquist-archive-scans-pt1.zip” from “RobotFan” finished.

[bjornruffian] OMG THIS IS AWESOME

[bjornruffian] Where did you get this?? Did you rob that museum?? This is PERFECT for that other Cyro/Ellison thing I’ve been thinking about doing after this stupid desert comic is over!!

[bjornruffian] It would be great if I had someone to help me with writing Cyro, HINT HINT

[RobotFan] I would be happy to assist if I had emotion circuits

[RobotFan] However, my lack of emotion circuits means I cannot be “happy” about performing any actions

[RobotFan] Nonetheless, I will assist

[RobotFan] To make this an equitable trade as is common in human custom, you may also provide your opinion on some recurrent bugs that readers have reported in my characterisation of Ellison

[bjornruffian] YESSSSSSSS :DDDDDD



Rossum, Sulla. “Tin Men and Tin Toys: Examining Real and Fictional Robots from the 1950s.” *Journal of Robotics Studies* 8.2 (2018): 25-38.

While the figure of the fictional robot embodies timeless fears of technology and its potential for harm, the physical design of robots real and fictional is often linked to visual cues of modernity. What was once regarded as an “object of the future” can become “overwhelmingly

obsolete” within a span of a few years, after advances in technology cause the visual cues of modernity to change (Bloch, 1979). The clawed, lumbering tin-toy-esque designs of the 1950s are now widely regarded as “tin can[s] that should have been recycled long ago” (Williamson, 2017). Notably, most modern critiques of Computron’s design tend to focus on its obsolete analogue dials...

watch-free-anime | Hyperdimension Warp Record | Episode 23 | Live Chat

Pyro: Okay, is it just me, or is Cyro starting to get REALLY attractive? I swear I’m not gay (is it gay if it’s a robot) but when he slung Ellison over his shoulder and used his claw to block the Sixth Saber at the same time

Pyro: HOLY SHIT that sniper scene RIGHT THROUGH THE SCOPE and then he fucking BUMPS ELLISON’S FIST WITH HIS CLAW

Pyro: Fuck it, I’m gay for Cyro I don’t care, I’ll fucking twiddle his dials all he wants after this episode

ckwizard: dude youre late, weve been finding cyro hot ever since that scene in episode 15

ckwizard: you know the one

ckwizard: where you just see this rectangular blocky shadow lumbering slowly towards first saber with those clunky sound effects

ckwizard: then his eyebulbs glint that really bright yellow and he bleeps about ACTIVATING KILL MODE and his grabby claws start whirring

ckwizard: theres a really good fic about it on fanficarchive... actually you might as well check the authors blog out [here](#), hes pretty cyro-obsessed

ckwizard: his earlier stuff is kinda uneven but the bjorn collabs are good—shes been illustrating his stuff for a while

Pyro: Okay

Pyro: I just looked at that thing, you know, the desert planet comic

Pyro: I think I ship it

Pyro: OH MAN when Ellison tries the manual repair on the arm joint and Cyro has a FLASHBACK TO THE ROBOT RECYCLER but tries to remind himself he can trust him

Pyro: Fuck it I DEFINITELY ship it

ckwizard: join the fucking club

ckwizard: its the fifth time im watching this episode, this series has ruined my life

ckwizard: i can't wait for season 2



bjorn-robot-collabs posted:

Hi everyone, bjornruffian and RobotFan here! Thanks for all your comments on our first comic collab! We're really charmed by the great reception to "In the Desert Sun"—okay, I'm charmed, and RobotFan says he would be charmed if he had the emotion circuits for that (he's an awesome roleplay partner too! LOVE his sense of humor :DDD).

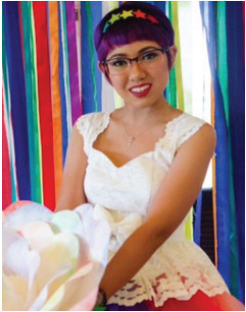
ANYWAY! It turns out that RobotFan's got this awesome collection of retro robot schematics and he's willing to share, for those of you who want to write about old-school robots or need some references for your art! (HINT HINT: the fandom totally needs more Cyro and Cyro/Ellison before Season 2 hits!) To be honest I'm not sure how legal it is to circulate these scans (RobotFan says it's fine though), so just reply to this post if you want them and we'll private message you the links if you promise not to spread them around.

Also, we're gonna do another Cyro/Ellison comic in the future, and we're thinking of making it part of an anthology. If you'd like to contribute comics or illustrations for that, let us know!

Get ready to draw *lots* of boxes, people! The robot revolution is coming!

9,890 replies

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Vina Jie-Min Prasad is a Nebula-nominated Singaporean writer working against the world-machine. Her short fiction has appeared in Clarkesworld, Uncanny Magazine and Fireside Fiction. You can find links to her work at vinaprasad.com.

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