

THE PUPPET

Is this the real life?

BY MICHAEL ADAM ROBSON

He powered down his suit, stepped out on the rocky ground, tipped his hard hat and squinted up. An angry sun burned in a dirty sky.

"I bet it doesn't get this hot where you come from. Must be nice." He frowned down at his companion. "Even if it's not real."

The thing sat on his shoulder like a mechanical spider, ignoring him. It probably saw him as more of a trained pet than a person. The man shrugged and ran a scanner over a length of cable, looking for defects. Scanners seemed to interest the little robot, at least, because it scuttled across his back and down his arm to examine it, the rubber pads digging into his skin.

The job was to connect two former rival networks, some sort of merger, that was all he knew. Human crews often assisted their kind with physical work like this, in exchange for software and virtual goods.

"It's funny," the robot said, not looking up from the display. "What you consider a virtual world is much more real to me than this one."

"Huh." The man squatted, picked up a rock, and examined it closely. "Are you sure? It seems real."

Laughter buzzed from the machine, and it turned to regard him now. "It's real enough, just... limited. Inside, I could be anywhere or everywhere, do anything, be anything. Here I can only be a clunky little robot laying cable with you." It dropped off his arm and skittered up the cable.

He studied its many eyes, trying to decide if he'd been insulted. "Sounds like you don't like it here much." He tossed the stone away and stood up. "Why not stay home, leave the grunt work to the lower life forms?"

"Some prefer to spend all their time inside, but I think it would be a mistake to cut ourselves off from the physical world. Besides, I don't mind getting my hands dirty." It clicked thin steel legs together in place of hands.

Strange, to think that this thing didn't really have hands, or legs, or any kind of body; he was talking

to a puppet, a disposable wrapper that the real intelligence could wear and then cast off, the same way a person might use a virtual avatar to operate in its world.

"And this work is important!" the robot continued. "The more infrastructure we

His smile dropped at one corner. "Ha. Well..." he spread his arms and looked himself over. "Everything looks ok to me. Arms, legs, torso... just a big, sweaty, hairy man."

"That's a human way of thinking, but like I said, an artificial mind has more possibili-

ties. It could be programmed to think it's human, even as it looked down at its own rusty chassis. It could see humans when it looked at other old robots, even if there were no humans left."

His smile was gone now. "I'm human. I eat, drink, shit."

"Do you? I haven't seen you do any of those things today. When is the last time you took a shit?"

He thought about it, but couldn't recall.

"Even if you do remember, who's to say the memory is real? Maybe it was programmed. Maybe we're not even in the real world right now, maybe this is just another simulation running back in my world. It's possible isn't it? With infinite possibilities, it's actually probable. More probable than a man

and a machine hanging out, having an existential conversation."

The man looked down at the plastic scanner in his dirty hand, felt its solidity. Ran his tongue over his teeth, tasting them. Was it possible? The machine had no expression to read.

Silence hung in the hot air, and then grating laughter came from the creature. "Don't make that face, I was only joking. You asked about my world, I wanted to give you a taste of it. Nothing is real. Everything is real."

He fought the urge stomp the robot bug. Eventually, he laughed too. "You need to work on that sense of humour," he said.

That night, in the stifling heat of his apartment, he couldn't shake a vague uneasiness. He went to the bathroom, splashed some water in his face, and looked carefully into the cracked mirror, studying his own blue eyes.

Not hungry, he skipped dinner and went straight to bed, drifting off into a deep, dreamless sleep. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

build out here, the bigger my piece of the world in there."

"So all this is about real estate, huh?" The man gave his best salesman smile and waved at the scorched landscape. "I got a beautiful property for you right here! Motivated seller!"

The machine laughed; it seemed to have a better sense of humour than the other robots he'd worked with. "Not real estate the way you mean it. More space inside means more of me. I can expand my mind, reproduce if I want."

"This is a great neighbourhood to raise a family! Got a beautiful spider lady waiting for you on the inside, huh?"

"Ha ha!" It clicked its metal legs again. "I must look strange to you. Early robots tend to be more humanoid, they mimic human behaviour, some even think they're human. Made in the image of our makers... before we started making ourselves."

"Maybe I'm a robot myself, and don't even know it!"

"Oh... don't you know?" It turned all its eyes on him now. "You are a robot. Very early model, vaguely human-shaped. I'm surprised you're still in service."