

Cannon Busters on Netflix: Two robots and an immortal embark on a road trip

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Cannon Busters, created by Satelight and Yumeta Company, is an anime adaptation of LeSean Thomas' fantasy-action-comedy comic book series (originally published in 2005 by Devil's Due and later reprinted). Thomas and Takahiro Natori, making his directorial debut with the project, co-directed the twelve-episode season. The project originated on Kickstarter for crowdfunding, and its creators eventually produced a short pilot in 2016, before Netflix picked the idea up and produced it as an original series in 2019.

The series wastes little time throwing the audience into its fictional world, presenting a collage of Western and Eastern influences, including the Wild West, sorcery and knights à la RPG (role-playing game) roles, science fiction and anime tropes. With this eclectic mixture of concepts, settings tend toward barren wastelands (icy tundra, forest and desert), small Western towns and sprawling megacities.

Cannon Busters is never visually boring, but some of its problems rapidly materialize. The series makes reference to legends, nations, governments and world history, but only explores the phenomena superficially, generating more annoyance than curiosity. The difficulties created by the lack of depth and development leave the series as a whole far too removed from recognizable reality, damaging much of the insight it might offer.

The series plot is ignited by the fall of the kingdom of Botica at the hands of the powerful sorcerer Locke (voiced by Billy Bob Thompson) who has revived magic (which, certain characters vaguely mention, was banned by society in the past) to seek revenge against Botica's king, whom Locke reveals is his natural father. Locke's brutal invasion forces Kelby (Zeno Robinson), the young prince, and his stoic guardian, Odin (Darien Sills-Evans), to find security in the

kingdom's last stronghold, Gara's Keep. Separated from Kelby, S.A.M. (Kamali Minter), the prince's robotic friend, sets out on her own quest to find him, which makes up the bulk of the series' runtime.

S.A.M.'s mission to find Kelby, which often has her making friends (mostly one-sidedly) with everyone she meets, regardless of the nihilistic world around her, leads to moments of genuine humor. Casey (Stephanie Sheh), an outdated engineering robot, joins S.A.M. early on, adding constant positivity with a side of reason to the show. The charm of these two characters grinds against the third main character, the self-centered Philly the Kid (Kevin Michael), the badland's most wanted outlaw and a man cursed with immortality. After S.A.M. steps in and stops a gang from killing/kidnapping Philly for the large bounty on his head, the latter grudgingly goes along with S.A.M.'s quest.

The trio travels across the world to reach Gara's Keep, running into various combative situations, facing off with an array of deranged foes and forces. Most episodes center on a single location the group comes across in their journey, often overshadowing the main plot for the sake of immediate hijinks. Character development also falls to the wayside, as the episodic adventures either crowd out more serious moments or provide only pseudo-development. At other points, ideas and plot points appear only to disappear without a trace later.

By the end of the series, only a few subjects worth a deeper examination have arisen, and each is limited in its impact. We learn that the Botican army slaughtered Philly's family, driving him to trade his soul to a magical entity for immortality to claim revenge. The series does nothing to prepare the viewer for this revelation, nor does it explain why Philly would

uncharacteristically and arbitrarily go along on S.A.M.'s expedition. Philly changes gears quickly on a whim, seemingly in accordance with the plotline's immediate needs, setting his sights on killing Kelby when he gets the chance and later changing his mind again.

This theme of Botica's hidden military brutality appears again in the series' B-plot following Kelby and Odin's track to Gara's Keep. While traveling, the group runs into mercenary forces from a country once at war with Botica, and now employed by Locke to hunt down Kelby. Odin defeats the small group, killing most of its members and capturing its leader, Hilda (Angelique Perrin), whom Kelby begs Odin to spare. Hilda, exposing nationalist pride and a hatred of Botica, shocks Kelby, unaware of Botica's military ventures. This conflict, which could lend itself to an artistic reflection on imperialist war, is ultimately short-circuited by an individualist approach and a lack of social understanding. Kelby and Odin don't explore this arc with any depth, with Kelby as a character devolving into a mere plot device by the final episode.

Finally, the eighth episode, perhaps the best in the season, starts promisingly, taking place in Zenith, a slum city located under a flying metropolis populated by a detached ruling elite. The trash of the floating metropolis rains down incessantly on Zenith, creating a powerful visual. Unfortunately, beyond emphasizing the miserable state of things, the show does little with any of this potential, instead directing the episode's attention toward Casey.

Left alone by Philly and S.A.M., Casey finds another engineering robot tasked with scrapping all the outdated robots that fall to Zenith. The robot expresses an extremely dark worldview, seeing all outdated robots, including itself and Casey, as no longer valuable to others and only useful as scrap. Casey falls into despair after seeing a heap of junked engineering robots, leading her to attempt to scrap herself. Though the concept presented in Casey's crisis is touching and interesting, it runs into the same issues as the others, the lack of serious treatment.

In its totality, *Cannon Busters* is an enjoyable but seriously flawed work, plagued by poor writing choices and still worse overall artistic execution. Yet, *Cannon Busters* is simply one example of the same style-over-substance issue dominating many animated works,

especially from the anime industry. Glimmers are few and far between, but they are there, and they can grow stronger, though this requires those working in the anime industry to move beyond tropes and "what looks cool" and treat reality with more artistry and more thought.



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