

***Lies of P: Envisioning Automata in the Belle Époque***

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*Lies of P* is a 2023 Korean action role-playing game developed by Neowiz Games and Round8 Studio. It is a free adaptation of Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), envisioning the main character as an automaton rather than a puppet. It is also set in the fictitious city of Krat and uses the Belle Époque for aesthetic inspiration. The architecture, for instance, reflects a variety of styles, lavish and rich with details, such as Neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau, which were predominant during that period.

In spite of how various cinematographic interpretations have shaped *The Adventures of Pinocchio* in the modern-day imagination, the original story was initially grimmer and darker in nature. This, to an extent, transposes into the game. One of the grounding elements of Collodi's work is not so much the importance of telling the truth as it is the role of education and obedience. *Lies of P* freely adapts and borrows elements from a universally renowned story, working on the original themes while also adding a novel dimension to them. In an interview for *Unreal Engine*, Round8 Studio stated that their intention was to take a globally-recognized story and give it a "fresh and unique twist" in order to resonate with the player base: "Although it may come as a surprise that we chose a fairy tale, the original *Pinocchio* story actually encompasses elements of black comedy, cruelty, and captivating characters" (Williams). This statement demonstrates that the developing team was fully aware of Collodi's work and its many layers and nuances. Their effort is not limited to the narratological dimension, however, because it is reflected in the aesthetic elements as well. The game world features scenery and settings reminiscent of the end of the nineteenth century with the addition of several steampunk elements, such as greater emphases on industrialization, autonomous machines, and clockwork mechanisms. This world-building also

adds minor Lovecraftian hues to the narrative with cosmic entities and unexplained phenomena that cohabit the city of Krat.

Round8 Studio furthermore stated that the Belle Époque was used as a basis for the aesthetics of the game, putting emphasis on lighting and technology: “We carefully calibrated the color temperatures of the lights to match the aesthetic of nineteenth-century gas lamps, prevalent during the period that serves as a backdrop for the game” (Williams). The contrast between light and dark, as well as this attention to the color of the illumination used in the game, gives *Lies of P* its uniqueness.

The development team also reflected on life during those days: “People living in the La Belle Époque witnessed vibrant and diverse improvements in both culture and technology such as the construction of the Eiffel Tower and the World’s Expo” (Williams). It was, in fact, during the Great Exhibitions that automata—anthropomorphic mechanical devices—became more accessible to the general public.<sup>27</sup> While these “robot precursors” were already present during the eighteenth century (*The Writer*, *The Artist*, and *The Musician*, all produced by Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son, are still preserved in Neuchâtel’s Musée d’Art et d’Histoire), they were usually manufactured for the highest ranks of nobility. *Lies of P* uses the novelty of automata produced during the nineteenth century as part of its world-building. The fictitious city of Krat, in fact, gains its importance for being the first to harness a new form of energy and using it to fuel automated machines that supposedly pave the way toward the future. As the narrative progresses, however, this energy source is revealed to have a grave flaw that leads to the androids rebelling. The plot mirrors the

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<sup>27</sup> For a more in-depth analysis, both on the historical existence of automata as well as how they functioned from a practical standpoint, see Nicholas Faulkes, *Automata: A Brief History of the Automata from Ancient Times to the Fée Ondine* (2017) and Alfred Chapuis and Edmond Droz, *Automata: A Historical and Technological Study* (1958).

original *Pinocchio* not only in that the protagonist, as an automaton, is a puppet of sorts, but also in that he confronts ontological dilemmas and the exploration of what it means to be human.

It is finally worth mentioning that other than through cinematics and interactions with the various secondary characters, much of the lore in *Lies of P* and its world-building can be discovered within what is commonly referred to as “flavor text,” and what this review will call “paratextual elements.” Similar to the function of the paratext in literature, these fragments are not meant to be the main focus of the game but rather exist to give a deeper dimension to the world-building itself. In *Lies of P*, the paratextual elements are diary entries, fragments of journals, item descriptions, and other such minor components. As such, delving deeper into the lore and world of the game is left entirely to the player’s own desire.

As previously stated, the game does not moralize on lying as being inherently evil or on honesty as always being the correct choice. At various times the narrative purposefully blurs these lines and requires the player to ponder the meaning of morality. For example, Lady Antonia is an old woman who appears as a non-player character (NPC) who interacts with the protagonist. Afflicted by a disease that will petrify her body, she is found looking at a painting of herself in her youth. She asks the protagonist if she still maintains part of her beauty or if she has lost the last shred of her human appearance. The player can choose between telling what may be referred to as a “white lie” and reassuring Lady Antonia, indicating compassion, or being bluntly honest, yet insensitive. In other words, *Lies of P* ponders the meaning of humanity by a means of subversion. The main character initially is no more than a puppet but slowly becomes more and more human through the player’s choices. The game does not simply preach on the righteousness of telling the truth as opposed to lying; rather, it focuses on how these decisions influence one’s growth—not in age, but in mentality, life, and wisdom. By purposefully blurring these lines, *Lies of P* inquires

into the ontological condition of human beings with an apt late-nineteenth-century setting that evokes the oneiric and fantastical imagery of the Belle Époque.

Works Cited

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