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## **SinoAlice and the question of authorship**

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**Title:** *SINoALICE* and the question of authorship

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**Tags:** SINoALICE, H  l  ne Sellier, Authorship, Yoko Taro, ludo-narrativism

Released in Japan in June 2017 and in the rest of the world in July 2020, *SINoALICE* is a mobile RPG video game created by the studio Pokelabo, published by Square Enix and directed by Yoko Taro, famously known for his work on the *Drakengard* series (Cavia, Access Games, 2003–2013) and the *Nier* series (Cavia, Platinum Games, 2010–2017). The game was released in a context of growing legitimation for video games as an art form and the construction of its culture around the figures of authors. Some studies focus on how video game authorship is constructed through social discourses (Kichrane, 2020). A similar analysis could be established for Yoko Taro, focusing on public appearances and books such as *The Strange Works of Yoko Taro* (Turcev, 2019). However, outside of this paratext, the games themselves already contain a statement about authorship, and this essay will tackle this issue through the lens of a formalist analysis of the narrative structure of *SINoALICE*.

Using a narrative structure similar to a play, with different acts and chapters, the game tells the stories of several characters, mainly inspired by fairy tales (such as Alice in Wonderland or Cinderella), whose aim is to revive their authors. To achieve their goal, they must fight the creatures (called nightmares) that haunt the world they live in: the Library. The gameplay thus consists of fighting waves of enemies, with a character (for which the player has chosen a class or “job”), in simple real-time combat, using different kinds of weapons that can be obtained randomly through a gacha (a mechanic that randomly gives a virtual item) or various gameplay rewards.

This essay will first focus on the use of the metaphor of the world as a stage, used to draw a parallel between characters and human beings. Then the concept of *kyara* will be explored to understand the difference between the two entities and the argument made about the independence of the characters from their creator. Finally, following post-structuralist theory, the question of the need for an author will be tackled. Overall, this essay argues that *SINoALICE* echoes contemporary doubts about authorial figures, emphasizing the importance of the characters and the audience.

### **Worlds as stages**

As a basis for the reflection on authorship, *SINoALICE* distorts the metaphor of the world as a theatre stage, famously used by Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. The theatre is a theme that infuses the whole game. The dramatisation of the story is first conveyed by the narrative structure. The game is sometimes praised because the story is not forced upon the player, who can skip the small pieces of text which appear between fights (McCarthy, 2020); however, the same can be said for the gameplay. Many players will choose to take advantage of the game's auto-play features which transforms combat into a non-interactive process that occurs predominantly off-screen. This has

strong relations to classical theatre's rules, where fights typically occur off-stage, outside of the audience's gaze.

[Image 0]

The visual aesthetics of the game also reflect the theatricalization. For example, to activate the gacha, which is a mechanic that randomly rewards the player a weapon, the player must pull on a rope that opens curtains that resemble those used on a stage. Moreover, the player is first greeted in the game by two characters, Parrah and Noya, that take the form of puppets and help them navigate both the interface of the game and the fictional world. The Library and its inhabitants are thus depicted as part of a theatre show.

In the game, Yoko Taro uses the idea that life is a performance for which the script has already been written to question the similarity between human beings and characters. Most protagonists come to the conclusion that their life is predestined. For example, in the first book, the ending of the first chapter of Alice's route details her defining characteristic: "Bondage. She was bound by the shackles of fate." This idea of destiny is not only present in the protagonists' musings, but players are also constantly reminded by Parrah and Noya about it. These characters have a similar narrative function to a chorus in a Greek tragedy, addressing both the characters and the audience and commenting on dramatic action. Contrary to their counterparts in traditional theatre, Parrah and Noya have two distinct voices, but often repeat the same ideas which contribute to the feeling of inescapability for the characters and the player.

[Image 1].

Like the Greek chorus, their role is to give information on the context of the story or to explain what happened, and to have an emotional impact on the audience (Graham, 2014). However, they are cynical and mean rather than empathic. Existing at a crossroad between the Library and the world of the player, they don't participate directly in the action but still seem to manipulate the characters. However, their design suggests their ambiguous position doesn't keep them from fate: the puppet imagery suggests a lack of agency. The metalepsis (Genette, 2004) between the fictional world and the real world or, in other words, the fact that Parrah and Noya break the fourth wall (for example, commenting on the game's "endless downloading" or "how unbalanced" it is), suggests that the player's reality follows the same cruel rules of the fictional universe: the real world, like the fictional world, is not fair or kind, but painful and inequitable.

The third part of the story—"Act of Reality"—is also based on this similarity between the two worlds: the Library universe collapses and the player is shown fictional stories set in the real world in which each folk tale character has a human doppelganger. One of the conclusions of the fourth chapter is the text, "This world is mean. We only know what is correct after we suffer. The only thing we can do is resent this world," which sums up the point of the act: showing that the human version of the character, like their fictional counterparts, live in a predetermined and unfair world.

Using the well-known metaphor of the world as a theatre stage (Navaud, 2010), *SINoALICE* represents both the characters (be they fictional entities or human beings) and the players as playthings of destiny. However, Yoko Taro first underlines their resemblance to highlight their difference: where flesh and blood people decline and die, characters live on eternally, outlasting even their author.

### **The eternal life of *kyara***

In *SINoALICE*, the extensive interrogation about the meaning of predestined lives offers a more precise reflection on characters and their becoming independent of their author. One can

understand the eternal life of Alice and the other avatars in the light of the concept of *kyara* which Ito Go (2005) differentiates from the notion of characters. The Japanese word, often used to describe contemporary media products, refers to a “proto-character”, an icon that precedes a character. In his work on *otaku* culture, Hiroki Azuma (2009) argued that cultural products are created and interpreted as a database of moe-elements (such as large eyes or blushing), *moe* being the emotional response to a *kyara*, which encompass different kinds of affection and attachment.

*SINoALICE* thus focuses on two-dimensional protagonists rather than dramatic events or fictional space and ties each of them to an abstract concept that has a strong emotional impact. Alice is described as “Bound” while Snow White is linked with the idea of “Justice”, etc. Instead of relying on round and complex characters, *SINoALICE* uses minimal characterization that relies on voice-over, archetypal visual representations and written repetitions. Pragmatically, the reiterations ensure that the player grasps the essentials of the story, even if they skim through the narrative part of the game. Poetically, the focus on a few chosen words serves the construction of a *kyara*. In the first and the last verse of each chapter, the text is not displayed at once or from beginning to end, in a sequence. On the contrary, phrases that define the protagonist appear and disappear on the screen at different rhythms, with different sizes and sometimes with blurring effects; the drawing of the character flashes from time to time until the final text settles.

[Image 2]

Along the line of animated poetry which has strong connections with the 20th-century literary avant-gardes (Bootz, 2011), the aesthetic of the text, blended with images, produces meaning in *SINoALICE* through conveying the essence of the *kyara*.

The game’s story can be read as the tragedy of characters who become more and more *kyara*, i.e., an abridged and filtered version of themselves. Rather than a collection of books or stories, the Library is depicted as a gathering of characters, endlessly kept alive by their desire to revive their author. However, in their quest, they lose something of themselves. For example, in the second act, Snow White, who is supposed to be the embodiment of Justice, understands the creatures she murders are conscious, yet doesn’t change her course of action. Underlying the “self-righteousness in the guise of justice” that she is described after a series of fights, the narrator shows how much the character is deluded, how much she has abandoned her sense of fairness. Like Snow White’s tale, every character’s story narrates how each gradually forfeits something, be it their sanity, their humanity, or their salvation. While losing themselves and becoming *kyara*, the characters become independent of their author.

The crossover between *NieR: Replicant* (Cavia, 2010), *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games, 2017) and *SINoALICE* questions how characters come to live beyond their creator. Grace Gerrish (2018) has already noted the “authorial disempowerment” that the player experiences in *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games, 2017), arguing that the “erasure of the author” allows them to experience defamiliarization. For example, she finds this kind of “poetic violence against the boundaries of convention” (p. 8) in the ending of the game, in which the player has to destroy the credits, “destroying the authorial power structure” (p. 7) *SINoALICE* resumes this line of thought, especially in the *NieR* crossover which begins with Parrah noting that “another one has arrived”, talking about the arrival of a new fictional character to the game’s cast. Since the game setting is a Library, the player expects a literary figure or the creative action of writing to be mentioned. However, the new characters seem to emerge from a dream state on their own (the Library being an afterlife realm in the *NieR* canon). Depicting the transition from one world to another without any exterior intervention, Yoko Taro symbolizes the fact that these characters, created in specific works such as *NieR*, break away from their original world to perpetuate their own existence in the Library. This space represents contemporary media cultures which contains all the stories told in different media in the way they are remembered today.

Like Alice, Snow White, or Red Riding Hood, the *NieR* series characters progressively acquire their autonomy, switching from being the main protagonists of their story to optional avatars with vague characteristics. Richard Saint-Gelais (2011, p. 7) refers to this transformation as “transfictionality”. He argues that those transfictional phenomena raise the question of the utility of authorship as an interpretative concept. Taro indeed chose the initial fairytale characters for their popularity and familiarity with the public at the expense of their authors. Even if the Grimm Brothers are quoted in the first verse of Snow White’s route, they are not the first authors of this story, since like the other folktales (Red Riding Hood, Gretel, etc.) they were originally transmitted orally. Concerning the other characters (such as Pinocchio or Aladdin), they seem to be chosen because they are the subject of many adaptations in contemporary media cultures which blurs the figure of their author, even when the original creator is named (for example, Lewis Carroll). Yoko Taro thus chose the characters of the game according to their propensity to become *kyara*.

Ultimately, if the characters are eternal in the world of *SINoALICE*, it is because they refuse to die since they are searching for their author, losing parts of themselves in the process until they become *kyara*. The game pictures authorship as an aesthetic phenomenon which is not immutable or obvious, but rather historical and cultural and always subject to interpretation. Not only readers can interpret an author’s work, but the very figure of the author can be used in different ways (or not at all) in the interpretative process.

### **Death and resurrection of the author**

The quest for the resurrection of the author is clearly established at the beginning of the game while its legitimacy is questioned throughout its narrative. *SINoALICE* thus follows a post-structuralist trend developed by French literary theorists around the 1970s (Compagnon, 1998). Continuing Proust’s arguments against the biographical method as a tool to understand literary texts, Roland Barthes (1968) and Michel Foucault (1969) reject the idea that literature should be understood as the expression of its author. This criticism of the notion of intentionality emerged when avant-gardes stated the importance of the figure of the reader as the criteria for evaluating the meaning of a text. However, completely erasing the figure of the author is difficult because a communication situation needs a sender. Foucault (1969, p. 47) proposes to distinguish the flesh and blood individual from an “author function,” a construction that allows the reader to interpret the text. For example, the Yoko Taro this essay mentions is an analytical tool which doesn’t aim to describe the real person’s exact intentions, especially since Yoko Taro is not the only creator of the game, as it is often the case for video games, and doesn’t seem to write all the narrative content (Asamirina, 2019). *SINoALICE* sums up the dilemma of the necessity of the author: the author is dead, characters become independent, readers (and fans) have more and more authority about the fictional universe; but there is a desire for an auctorial figure to attribute a responsibility and a coherence over the story.

The first verse of each route in the first part of the game, “Act of Impulse” details the characters’ motivations. Alice thinks only her author can save her, while Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty want to be part of another story. According to Parrah and Noya, the price for the resurrection of the author is to kill the creatures called nightmares. Some characters notice that this quest may be morally wrong or unnatural; for example, Alice notices that “it goes against the laws of the world to bring a dead man back to life.” Showing that the characters’ reasons for searching for their author are clearly selfish, the game questions the interpretative impulse to refer to a creator.

The need for authorship is particularly disputed in Pinocchio’s story since he is looking for an authority, someone who would dictate his actions. Showing the musings of the puppet between two battles, the third verse of the first chapter in the first book, “a story with no author is like a sailor with no compass,” presents an established understanding of the notion of authorship: the author is an overarching figure that allows one to make sense of the story. However, the game challenges this view by depicting Pinocchio as a coward who runs away from his responsibilities: in the same way

Pinocchio should be in charge of his own life, the reader should assume on his own the interpretation of the text [Image 3].

The importance of the reader over the author is clearly stated in a *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) crossover. Presenting a detailed historical account of the shooting game, the chapters end with a metalepsis in which the character Kaguya explains that “people will tire of [their] stories and [they will] be forgotten too.” This discourse is picked up by Parrah and Noya who argue that the discontinuation of the mobile game hosted on servers is not a problem since its experience will live on in the players’ memories.

After the cross over, the game is not finished, as there are still acts and characters that will be revealed bit by bit to the players, and the questions, “Should we revive the author? Is having an authoritative figure a good thing, a necessary thing?” are only raised and not answered. Whereas the video game industry is still coming to terms with the notion of game authorship (Krichane, 2020), *SINoALICE* raises doubts inside the player’s mind about auctorial figures and reasserts the interpretative power of the reader whose connection should be to the characters, or more precisely to the vague *kyara* figures whom everybody can appropriate. In this way, *SINoALICE*, using cross overs and fairy-tale characters, facilitates the players’ connection to its fictional figures much more strongly than it does to its author, Yoko Taro.

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