

The return of the “virtual subject” to reality: the new cultural transformation of the concept of “idol” in the context of video games

Kangkaixin Wang

School of Arts, Nankai University, Tianjin, China

wkkx1784236514@gmail.com

Abstract. The concept of “idol” in the context of mass culture, first proposed by Leo Loventhal, has undergone continuous changes with the ongoing development of the cultural field. In recent years, the well-established concept of “idol” has been reinvigorated in large Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), leading to new cultural phenomena. The difference lies in the fact that traditional “produced idols” and “consumed idols” exist in the real-world cultural field, where they ultimately result in a vision-based concealment that masks individuals within the cultural audience; whereas the creation of “fictional idols” in the context of video games results in a vision-based concealment confined to the interaction field of the virtual world. On this basis, players are able to examine their true existence in the real world, leading to outcomes of resistance and self-education within the real cultural field.

Keywords: idol, MMORPG, mass culture, virtual subject, interaction field

1. Introduction

The concept of “idol” within the scope of mass culture has existed for over sixty years since it was first proposed by Frankfurt School scholar Leo Loventhal in 1961. In his work *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, Loventhal used this concept to explain the symbolic visions within the cultural field that are widely recognized and worshipped [1], further exploring how dominant discourses use these “crude and simple individualistic” visions to shape an idealized image of personal life for cultural audiences. The life visions woven by idol imagery conceal the discourse fields in which the lower classes are increasingly assimilated, with the governing discourse regulating the lives of the masses beneath the vision of a particular lifestyle, thereby highlighting the coercive power and tendency toward homogenization in post-Enlightenment rational societies.

In the era of electronic technology, idol imagery, which represents the life vision of individuals within mass culture, is stimulating new changes within the fictional survival domain of video games. Under the scope of contemporary video games, the concept of idols has given birth to new forms of life vision: the “fictional idol.” Traditional “produced idols” appeal to grand societal values and ideals, while the formation of “consumed idols” is linked to the commodification and commercialization of idol symbols. Both exist and function within the individual-real-world field. The advent of the game’s virtual world and virtual communities has broken the traditional discourse gap between society and the individual: compared to the traditional concepts of “produced idols” and “consumed idols,” the “fictional idol” weaves the vision-based concealment of idol imagery from real life into the virtual world of video games. As a self-projected image of players in the virtual world, the “fictional idol” not only creates a concealment of an ideal state of existence but also offers players an opportunity to return to their subjectivity and reinterpret themselves. In terms of the results of the imagery’s effects, the “fictional idol” leads to the return and self-awareness of the player’s true self in the real world, rather than the vision-based concealment seen in traditional idol imagery that hides individual society members.

In short, compared to the traditional idol concept, which creates a vision of existence for individuals in the real world, idol imagery in the context of video games constructs players’ visions of existence in the virtual world and thereby facilitates the self-projection of the player’s real subjectivity over the imagery of the “fictional idol”—the construction of the “fictional subject.” The “fictional idol,” while constructing a concealed individual vision, also provides individuals within the mass culture scope with the possibility of returning to their subjectivity and attending to their true selves, thanks to the self-projection nature of its idol imagery.

2. “Produced idols” and “consumed idols”: the concealment-based vision of traditional idol imagery

The traditional imagery of idols is built upon an obscured vision that acts upon individuals in society. Lowenthal argues that the concept of idols originates from a “crude and simple individualism,” based on a classic idea:

In biographies from the early 20th century, the protagonists who were first worshipped and who occupied people’s “ideal life goals” were mostly productive role models and successful individuals in daily life. They came from fields like natural sciences, business, and industry, and made achievements capable of transforming technology and productivity in their respective areas. This vision of becoming a model for transformation in the productive domain is the manifestation of “production idols.” The core characteristic of production idols lies in their reflection of societal shared values and ideals: these idols might be artists, actors, sports stars, or other public figures. They were shaped into widely appealing figures through biographical literature, opening a “gateway of opportunity” for readers. To some extent, they were seen as successful role models to imitate, sketching a vision and exemplary image for their audience. After reading these biographies, readers would admire the protagonists and seemingly believe that they too could emulate and surpass these production idols in the near future. In the textual medium of production idols—biographical literature (especially popular biographies)—optimism and the atmosphere of a “reachable” vision typically permeated the text. Although beneath this idea, the spiritual plight of the lower classes and the proletariat, oppressed and lacking the time or passion to reform their class or even alter social systems, is covered up, production idols still built a seemingly attainable castle in the air for the masses. Thus, with the development of biographical literature, production idols continuously expanded in the 20th century, eventually becoming a social and cultural phenomenon and a symbol of “a model function for personal imitation.”

In contrast, the vision carried by the concept of “production idols” also brought immense social obscurity: beneath the grand and seemingly accessible ideal lies the discourse field where the lower classes are increasingly assimilated. The ideal life sketched by “production idols” is merely an “illusion of cultural industry” [2], which internally stipulates an ideal state of society’s life. In essence, it remains a coercive manifestation of post-Enlightenment industrial rationality. The emergence of “production idols” represents an attempt by propagandist institutions, which hold cultural hegemony, to shape one-dimensional behavior and express their own communicative domains [3]. This attempt was mediated through the images of protagonists in 20th-century biographies. Under the brilliance of production idols represented by biographical protagonists, the boundary between social surface phenomena, structural dilemmas, facts, and fiction gradually becomes blurred. The result is the continued development and self-shaping of the false “freedom of will” illusion under the radiance of production idols.

“Production idols” build a “freedom of will” illusion where everyone can freely achieve their goals through their own will. This so-called “freedom of will” is a constructed illusion of purposive and consequential freedom: the emergence of “freedom of will” arises from the obscured common sense in the dominant discourse about the real dilemmas: issues such as the occupation of production resources, increased waste, exploitation and alienation of producers, and other structural contradictions in society are covered up under the “willful freedom” discourse and the vision of “production idols.” Moreover, the creation of “freedom of will” simultaneously results in the illusion that anyone can become a “production idol” (which is the very meaning of “freedom of will”), thus leading to a self-sustaining synthesis in its construction [4]. This false vision of freedom weakens the contradictions between different classes in society, attempting to suppress alien elements within the construction of such homogeneity. From the perspective of individuals in society, the emergence of the “production idol” image clearly constitutes an obscured uniformity of public discourse.

As mass culture evolves through the passage of time due to shifts in productivity, it enters new stages of development, and the imagery of idol culture also changes accordingly. Levant [1] examines this transformation, stating: “We call the protagonists of biographies from the past ‘production idols,’ because we think the protagonists in today’s magazines should be named ‘consumer idols.’ In fact, almost all of them are directly or indirectly related to the leisure sector: they either do not belong to industries that serve society’s basic needs (such as entertainment or sports), or they are more or less clumsy agents of social productive factors.”

If “production idols” represent a successful vision that readers can imitate, the rise of “consumer idols” signifies a shift in the purpose of the idol image as mass culture evolves. During the era of “consumer idols,” the idol image no longer represents purposeful and result-oriented “free will.” During the period of “production idols,” people’s idol worship was a vision centered on self-education, with the aim of making oneself a production idol in the future. Production idols demonstrated the confidence that the “lower classes” could rise to the masses and celebrated a form of self-reliant individualism. The emergence of “consumer idols” suggests that the purpose of idol worship, initially a fantasy of “free will” by the subject, has ultimately transformed into the idol’s own false vision, which is now consumed and appreciated by the audience. Rather than aspiring to become an idol, the public is more inclined to admire the dazzling idols and intentionally separate themselves from the subject in their vision, recognizing the idol as an object distinct from themselves. In other words, the consumer idol indicates that readers acknowledge the fading of the “production idol” vision and extricate it from their “free will” delusion, transforming it into an interactive object—an object built on the foundation of commodity consumption.

From this transformation, we can see that the concept of idols, as a social veiling vision for mass survival, inevitably changes with the shifts in phenomena faced by the masses in the cultural field. This sets the tone for the new changes in idol imagery in the era of electronic technology. The transition from “production idols” to “consumer idols” reflects the trend of cultural products and symbols being commodified since the mid-20th century: during this process, the image and meaning of idols are no longer just a reflection of social values but have become tools to drive commodity sales and consumption. Through advertising, marketing, and other forms of media promotion, the image of idols is used to attract consumers, fostering the development of a consumer

culture. The seemingly original construction vision is unveiled in the birth of “consumer idols,” revealing its true nature and distance. However, this does not mean that the original veil has been completely clarified—on the contrary, the shift from “production idols” to “consumer idols” directly reflects the audience’s passive self-veiling: on the ruins of the shattered “production idol” vision, the idol worship of the masses has shifted towards material consumption and spiritual enjoyment. Popular culture products lack any genuine artistic characteristics; what they present are: standardization, clichés, conservatism, and hypocrisy, catering to consumers as mere commodities.

Therefore, both “production idols” and “consumer idols” as mass cultural imagery stem from the veiling of certain visionary constructs of social individuals under the power discourse in an era of alienation within the cultural field. The idol imagery not only veils individual uniqueness and social diversity but also obscures the deep-rooted social contradictions and economic problems in capitalist society. When the idol image becomes a key tool for veiling mass discourse, it naturally becomes a “myth” in capitalist society under the tool-rationality, legitimizing the facts of power discourse and enslaving human thought to social facts. In this context, individuals in society face an increasingly severe dilemma of homogenization. As the cultural field of mass culture enters the second decade of the 21st century, the increasingly mature video game industry and the rise of virtual game worlds have led to a shift in the social field of interaction, from real-life society to the game world. The image of the “idol” naturally enters the field of video games, where new cultural phenomena emerge within the virtual society constructed by video games.

3. “Fictional idols”: the imagination collision in the context of video games

In the field of popular culture in the twenty-first century, the cultural imagery of idols has undergone a transformation with the rise of video games. After the shift from the “production of idols” to the “consumption of idols,” a new evolution has taken place within a new cultural context. Virtual game worlds and virtual societies, represented by Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), have extended the realm of player interactions from the real world into the virtual world constructed by video games. In this context, the imagery of idols intertwines with the virtual worlds constructed by video games, collectively sparking the emergence of the “fictional idol” imagery.

Unlike the illusions associated with traditional idols, the existence and function of the “fictional idol” first occur within the interactive realm constructed by the game world, rather than directly influencing real society. This can be attributed to the fact that MMORPGs, as electronic simulation games, are capable of constructing a virtual interaction field—a “virtual society.” The main content of MMORPGs can be broadly summarized as follows: thousands of players enter a shared virtual world, creating virtual characters to engage in adventures, interactions, competitions, and other activities, growing and developing. Therefore, the realm of mass cultural interactions in MMORPGs does not directly occur in the real world but is first constructed through the “game world,” a virtual society. Based on this foundation, the emergence of the “idol” imagery in the virtual society must rely on virtual individuals—the “game characters”—a natural result shaped by the characteristics of MMORPGs. In the virtual worlds constructed by MMORPGs, due to the high interactivity and freedom of the game itself, players can create their virtual characters based on the complete worldview of the game and interact with the game world and other players, producing intertextual creative outcomes through their personal game experiences (narrative storytelling). The social vision of existence is transformed into an indirect illusion within the virtual world, relying on the player’s projection of their self-perception onto the game character. At the same time, players create a “virtual self-recognition” akin to a “double image.” This means that from the very beginning of its creation, the “fictional idol” carries the potential to construct a “virtual subject” life that transcends the discipline of social life.

The formation of virtual societies provides the basis for the transformation of the idol concept, and the construction process of the “virtual idol” imagery, due to its existence within a virtual realm, cannot be connected through real-world verbal interactions. It is completed through the intertextuality of broadly defined texts within the virtual society. The material carriers supporting the “production idol” and “consumption idol”—“biographies and other forms of literary works”—are written unilaterally by authors and the social discourses influencing them, which directly obscure individuals in the real cultural realm. In contrast, MMORPGs allow large numbers of players to participate simultaneously online and jointly construct dialogues. This means that the personal stories of game characters (the projection of players’ subjects) within the virtual society become the textual foundation for the existence of the “fictional idol.” If we compare MMORPGs to traditional “literary works,” every player is both an audience for the literary work and a creator of the text. This implies that MMORPGs generate a typical phenomenon of intertextual creation: each player’s character has a story they have written themselves, and the “relationship generated by multiple texts” [5] constitutes the main body of the virtual world’s textual story. In MMORPGs, players weave their texts based on the background settings of the game’s foundational text and, based on this, interact with other player characters in the virtual world.

After the shift in the narrative agency to the player’s subjectivity, the high degree of freedom in MMORPG role-playing elements allows players to empathize with their characters and fully immerse themselves in the roles they create. This leads to the “self-projection” of the player’s real-world subjectivity onto the character, while simultaneously constructing “virtual self-awareness” and the imagery of a “fictional idol.” For example, martial arts MMORPG games like *Jianxia Qingyuan Online 3* and *Nishuihan* allow players to integrate their own subjectivity into the characters they control through interaction with NPCs and story development. Players interact with the game world from a first-person perspective, blending their identity with the role they are playing. In order to allow players to construct a complete and natural virtual self-awareness, MMORPGs do not merely involve

dialogue between the player's-controlled character and the game world, but often break the "fourth wall" between the game world and the real world. For instance, in *Final Fantasy XIV*, at the end of the main storyline of the sixth chapter "End of the Moonlight Path," when the credits roll, the "Warrior of Light (the protagonist): Player ID" is displayed, placing the character controlled by the player in the game's final segment, significantly enhancing the player's connection to the character within the game world. At this point, the player, as a subject in the real world, is no longer merely a reader of the game text and an experience of its story but also becomes the author of the game world's narrative; this leads to an intertextual phenomenon within the game text. This means that the real-world player has already participated in the virtual society's interaction, and virtual self-awareness quietly emerges during the process in which the player shifts from being a reader to an author of the interactive narrative.

The emergence of virtual self-awareness makes the projection of the player's own subjectivity inevitable. When MMORPGs position players as characters, they naturally encourage players to imagine corresponding survival visions within the game world, allowing them to freely explore the game world from the perspective and identity of the new subject. It is in this context that the "fictional idol" arises. The vision of the fictional idol within the game world enables players to construct new life experiences and social groups, temporarily suspending their existence as subjects in the real world. Instead, within the game world, they build fictional subjects and character groups based on the survival vision of the fictional idol. Take *World of Warcraft* as an example: Dak Krause was a friendly, casual player in the U.S. server of *World of Warcraft*. In the game world, he interacted with other players as a "helpful female hunter" and assisted countless new players, earning him a high reputation within the entire guild (a community of organized players) and even the broader game community. Tragically, Dak Krause passed away at the age of 28 from chronic leukemia on August 22, 2007. One year prior to his death, he had already known about his condition and, using his in-game character "Kelly," wrote a short poem, which he left in the in-game mailbox to say farewell to the players he had known. After his death, nearly a thousand players from the U.S. server of *World of Warcraft* spontaneously held a grand funeral and farewell ceremony in the game world, drawing the attention of Blizzard Entertainment, the game's developer. Subsequently, his character "Kelly" was immortalized in the game as an NPC, retaining the outfit and appearance from his last login, and the poem he wrote, "Olica's Poem," was fully incorporated into the game's storyline, becoming an important narrative element in his interactions with other players.

Clearly, in Dak Krause's story, his life as a subject in the real world has ended, but in the game world, the virtual subject "Kerry" he constructed continues to exist independently of the real subject and forms an intertextual connection with Dak Krause's identity within this broader text. When "Kerry" interacts with other players in the virtual world, for the players, the interaction is not only with the game character but also with Dak Krause's legendary story, expressing their condolences. In this context, "Kerry" represents Dak Krause's own subject frozen and projected within the game world.

Thus, in the MMORPG's interactive field, players undergo identity transformations through intertextual text weaving, projecting their "existing settings" and "desired settings" onto the game characters. The former constructs the "virtual subject" under the virtual self-recognition in the game world, while the latter creates the "fictional idol" imagery in the game. In the encounter between the player and the game world, as the player progresses through the game, the encounter with the game gradually fades and transforms into the player projecting themselves onto the character they control in the game world and engaging in new encounters with other "characters."

The interaction of virtual subjects is not merely communication between the player's subject and the game object but occurs within the background of the "fictional society" of the game world, where players interact with other players in the virtual game world. On this basis, after the integration of the real-world player subject and the "character" subject in the game, a natural distinction arises: the player uses the identity of the fictional subject within the game world, conducting communication and interaction under the guidance of virtual self-recognition. This necessarily suspends the fixed cultural and individual identity as well as group recognition established in the real-world society. From this perspective, compared to single-player life simulation games like *The Sims*, MMORPGs offer more opportunities for players to interact within the constructed fictional subject and social community. During gameplay, the interaction between the fictional subject and the game story gradually gives way to communication between players, relying on the game world and the characters set within it. This provides players, as game audiences, with an opportunity to reconceptualize self-recognition and redefine their self-setting, leading to the construction of subjectivity. Moreover, players, through the MMORPG, reconstruct their individual image and self-perception, completing "self-recognition, individual symbol output, and meaning exchange" [6] within the interaction field.

4. Virtual illusions and the unveiling of reality: the return of "fictional idols" to reality

The concept of "fictional idols" has a transformative impact on the existence of individuals in the realm of popular culture. This is the unique significance of the "fictional idol" image: First, a "fictional idol" is not a part of the game world but a contradictory representation constructed by the player's subjectivity. Second, the construction of "fictional idols" takes place within the player's "artistic experience activities" in the game [7]. Its existence must return to the experiencer and acknowledge that the existence of "fictional idols" depends on the player's experience in imaginary objects (rather than game objects). Third, unlike traditional idols, the image of the fictional idol breaks through the illusion of idol concealment, allowing the player to return to a real self-examination through the process of playing the game.

First, as a self-representation, the contradiction of the “fictional idol” arises because it simultaneously serves as a projection of the player’s self in the game world and exists as a paradox of the other in the player’s cognition. Within the virtual field provided by MMORPGs, players construct the foundation of the virtual subject’s formation through the virtual social foundation and the intertextuality of game texts. However, the premise of virtual construction requires a certain connection and similarity between the game world and the real world, which forms the basis for the player’s projection of the self into the game world. Under this premise, the characters and the “fictional idols” the player pursues do not belong to the content of the game world itself. Although daily activities of characters depend on the game world to be completed, tracing the self-designed backstory and the communities formed through player interactions still reveals that these originate from the collective expectations of the player community in the same game world. This shared presupposition stems from the player’s personal vision of different self-experiences, while maintaining their identity as individuals in the real world. Therefore, the existence of the “fictional idol” necessarily relies on the player’s existence in the real world and is the ideal (virtual) subjectification of the real-world self within the game world.

The issue is that, as a projection of the self, the “fictional idol” image has not completed the process of idol concealment in the cognition of the individual but instead causes the opposite result when returning to self-recognition. In the process of empathizing with a character, the real-world subject cannot fully merge their real-world self with their parallel world self because the subject’s actual cognition of themselves must return to their real-world existence rather than the “dream” constructed by the virtual game. Thus, the fictional idol, as a virtual subject in the subject’s cognition, is not a construct of a real subject but rather a medium or tool for self-recognition. Although it projects certain essential attributes of the subject, such as visions, interactions, and even the subject’s personality, through the character’s interactions in the virtual world, when returning to self-recognition, it becomes an object external to the self. The relationship between the fictional idol and the real subject is not like the difference between imitation and the prototype of imitation but is more akin to the process of self-subjectification under the discourse construction of the game world. However, this process is incomplete because of MMORPGs’ return-to-subject feature, resulting in the “fictional idol” becoming a contradictory representation constructed by the real-world player’s subject, presenting dual characteristics of subjectivity and objectivity in the player’s cognition. This leads to the “fictional idol” as an idol image’s concealment being limited to its corresponding “fictional subject.” For the real-world player, when returning to their self-recognition after the game, the “fictional subject” living in the game world and the “fictional idol” envisioned in the game’s “future” are unable to return to the player’s subject because they are cognitively objectified by the player, much like a “one-way moving train.” As a result, the “fictional idol” cannot exert its inherent idol-like concealment effect on the player’s real-life situation.

Based on this, examining the form of its existence reveals that, like its construction process, the “fictional idol” depends on the player’s experience in imaginary objects (rather than game objects) and not in the game world itself. The interaction between the player and the game character—the “fictional idol”—is established through the process of “aesthetic experience.”

The existence of the MMORPG game world forms Gadamer’s “self-contained world” aesthetic object: During the player’s experience, the game world temporarily suspends the player’s connection to the real world. However, this does not mean the player enters the fictional game world. Through the determinacies of the game world’s background setting, MMORPG transforms the player’s gameplay into an aesthetic experience. The impact of the “fictional idol” on the player allows the player to escape from the real world’s life order and return to their holistic existence. As an intentional relationship and intentional process, what the player feels during the MMORPG game experience is not just a momentary, isolated virtual pleasure detached from the real world but, through comparing the real order with the game’s virtual freedom, establishing the experience process in both the game world and the “fictional idol.” “Every experience arises from the continuity of life and is simultaneously linked to the whole of one’s own life”. Through this aesthetic experience, the player returns to themselves. The ultimate goal is to return to oneself—seeking the possibility of escaping the real-world order by constructing the “fictional idol” in the game world and fundamentally transcending the meaning constructed by the real-world subject’s order and discourse. In this concept, the player returns to an examination of the life meaning of self through their experience with the “fictional idol,” thereby reinterpreting their overall understanding of self-life.

Thus, the “fictional idol” provides the player’s self-subject with a return from the other to the self: When the self in the real world suspends its defined existence and enters the unfamiliar virtual world, the process of constructing the “fictional idol” in the virtual world is also a process of reconstructing and understanding oneself. Through incomplete subjectification, it influences the player, and ultimately, the player’s cognition, through the “fictional idol,” returns to their own self-examination. This forms the movement structure of real self—fictional subjectification—returning to self-education. In this structure, through the “strange” world of the game, the player constantly returns to the reflection of their real-life situation. In the virtual world constructed by MMORPG, the “fictional idol” created by the character constitutes a visionary concealment of self-cognition within the game’s virtual theme, and the concealment of the “fictional idol” simultaneously hides the enlightenment that allows the real-world subject to return to the examination of their situation. Through the experience of playing, the real-world player can re-examine the specific order covering their real-world subject in the contradiction of this concealment, enabling them to directly face their real self’s existence in the real world. The truth exposed by the “fictional idol”—the self-examination of the player’s subject—naturally undergoes unveiling in this struggle, allowing the player to perceive it.

Therefore, after the dialectical movement of concealment in the virtual domain of “fictional idols” and unveiling in the real-world domain in the MMORPG game context, the player ultimately returns to a genuine reflection in the real world. The reality of the game world is undoubtedly a symbolic construction under the symbolic order of the real world, but in its concealment, it provides the player with a window to return to their own real situation. MMORPG, as a mode of human self-experience, offers the

subject visionary concealment during the experience process but ultimately provides the player with a “unveiling” in the Heideggerian sense [8]. Under the unified freedom of idol concealment, it projects the dilemmas of real life, enabling the player to understand reality through the game and reflect on their real situation, thus achieving a sense of meaning. This sense of meaning is not the same as “completeness” or “total vision” but is more like realizing the lack of true meaning in life amidst the carnival-like [9], hedonistic virtual experience, compensating for the self-recognition obscured by the rules of reality. This causes the normative power of ideology to briefly give way to the concealment of the “fictional idol,” allowing the player to paradoxically care for their real situation and true state of existence under the vision of the “fictional idol.” The root cause of the transformation of the “fictional idol” compared to traditional “mass idols” and “consumer idols” lies here: it presents to players living in the real world the possibility of self-reflection on their true self under the virtual vision.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of “idol” as an important image in the realm of popular culture has generated new phenomena in the cultural field of video games in the new century through the concepts of “production idol” and “consumer idol” created during the “freedom of will” and “consumer vision” periods.

Unlike traditional “mass idols” and “consumer idols,” the “fictional idol” exists through the interaction field created by virtual games, allowing the player’s self-construction to be completed in the virtual space and breaking through the visionary concealment of the traditional idol image on the real self. Through the “virtual subject” construction and interaction behavior in the game world, the “virtual image’s” visionary concealment remains within the game’s interaction field, while the player, through the “fictional idol’s” return to reality, can perform a self-examination of their real-life situation. Within the virtual world constructed by MMORPG, when the normative power of ideology temporarily gives way to the concealment of the “fictional idol,” the real-life existence exposed by the “fictional idol” will tear apart the false appearance of individual life in society caused by instrumental reason: only when concealment remains within the virtual game field can a person outside the game open a window to examine their true-life situation.

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