

Virtual or Real: Analysis on the Development of Virtual Idols in the Simulation Society--Taking "LASER" and "MANTA" for Examples

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Abstract: Virtual idols with "beautiful skins" and "interesting souls" have gradually become the idolize goal of the second-generation youth group and come into public view. Based on Jean Baudrillard's "simulacra theory", this paper summarizes the dual empowerment of voice control created by Cat's Ear Entertainment to virtual idol men's groups LASER and MANTA from the virtual and realistic perspectives, and finds that virtual idols also have three major dilemmas in the simulacra society: the fans of virtual idols are alienated; IP long tail communication bundles fan consumption; Pink circle thinking breaks the utopia of virtual idols. With the continuous development of the concept of meta-universe, the healthy and sustainable development of virtual idols is still on the road.

1. Preface

Compared with real-life idols, virtual idols are light-packed, with strong plasticity, unlimited life without the bondage of human "worldly desires" in image and personality, and can maintain a good physical condition for a long time, and rarely have various disputes with contracting agencies, so they are called "idols that never collapse" by the vast number of young people in the Z era and have attracted attention. The so-called Virtual Idol is an idol created based on new digital media technologies such as virtual reality, engine animation, motion capture, image recognition and speech synthesis, which does not exist in the form of material entities [1]. At present, as a secondary gathering place, Cat's Ear FM launched the first voice-controlled all-C virtual idol men's team LASER in China in 2020, and took advantage of the situation to launch the same type of MANTA in 2021. For a time, the two men's groups were concerned and sought after by many young people of the second generation in the Z era. The long-term regular comprehensive output of the group and the continuous out-of-circle music made these two virtual idol men's groups gain many "fans". Like real idols, they released albums, filmed MVs, held large-scale concerts and live broadcasts, and even appeared the "treatment" of real idols such as offline support and official surroundings. Although the virtual idol group lacks a "real" material carrier in real life, its same commercial value also shows great economic benefits.

Metauniverse is an open source platform which is highly interconnected between virtual reality and closed-loop economy. It is a virtual world which is parallel to the

real world and always online [2]. In the meta-cosmic world, "digital man" with "beautiful skin" and "interesting soul" has become a hot direction. Jean Baudrillard, a post-modern theorist, pointed out that illusory simulacra has replaced images and become the main principle of media communication. In the simulacra world, all originals no longer exist, only simulacra itself exists. As the product of secondary subculture and modern digital technology, virtual idols have gradually become a direction of youth idol worship and krypton gold. LASER and MANTA, as the representatives of completely virtual personality idols, their images are completed by digital modeling technology, and their actions are completed by computer background operation; The sound is provided by real people and processed by speech synthesis software. At the moment when "digital people" are hot, the virtual idol men's team sought after by young people of the second element has become a popular outlet of the meta-universe craze.

2. The combination of reality and unreality: the simulacra empowerment of virtual idol groups

2.1. Virtual empowerment: the image of "paper man" laid the foundation stone

2.1.1. Anthropomorphic image: the ideal best idol

Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher, thinks that "body" is more beautiful, precious and dazzling than anything else. However, the current structure of production/consumption

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has contributed to the double practice of the disharmony of the body and the representation: the practice of the body as a capital and the practice of the body as an idol [3]. First of all, the connection between young people of generation Z and virtual idols exists in the imaginary space. These young people have grown up in virtual environments such as games, internet and technology, and the aesthetics of different dimensions have become more and more abundant, and the value of virtual idols has become more and more important. The images of the nine members of the virtual idol men's team LASER and MANTA are different, and there will be no inevitable problems such as body anxiety, aging appearance and physical exhaustion that real idols worry about. Secondly, Marshall McLuhan put forward that "media is the extension of human beings" in *Understanding Media: On the Extension of Human Beings*. The mass media presents the male body to the audience by idolizing and symbolizing it, so as to meet the psychological cognition and expectation of women, the main consumer group of virtual idols. They enter the virtual field constructed by the media to "stare" at the male body and "willingly" identify and accept it. The appearance images of two virtual idol male groups, LASER and MANTA, are closer to the imagination of young people and become the representatives of ideal idols under the design of technicians. The majority of fans are willing to pay the bill and are keen to pursue it.

2.1.2. People-oriented modeling: three-dimensional personality building

Virtual idol groups, as "digital people", still appear as "people". Erving Goffman pointed out in the theory of parody that real people manage their impressions in order to satisfy their own expectations and goals. Similar to real people, the initial personality setting of virtual idols is to bring good sensory experience to fans, provide emotional companionship for fans as much as possible, and realize emotional resonance. American scholar Donald A. Norman put forward the theory of "three levels of emotion" in *Emotional Design*: the emotional appeal of instinct layer comes from the good sensory experience brought by virtual idols, the emotional appeal of behavior layer comes from the experience brought by virtual idols, and the emotional appeal of reflection layer depends on the specific emotional feelings and memories given to users by the personalized characteristics of virtual idols [4]. Two groups of virtual idol groups, LASER and MANTA, clearly pointed out the likes and dislikes of each character in the initial poster. For example, Gu Ziyao is the captain of LASER, and as a ruthless rich second generation, he firmly believes that "silent efforts will always make a sound"; Jiang Ke is the facade of MANTA. He plays around in a practical, powerful and gentle way, and takes "love and hate are frank, and we can be invincible" as the motto. Although virtual idols lack substance, they break through the limitations of human body, meet the emotional needs of young people through technical imagination, and provide emotional value of positive energy. This kind of "use and satisfaction"

between fans and idols promotes the communication and interaction between virtual idols and fans, and realizes the communication of virtual idol groups from the second-dimensional cyber world to the third-dimensional real space, becoming virtual "people" with real "personality" and permanent "personal design".

2.1.3. Group comprehensive output: entertainment idol company

Choosing the idol group model to "debut" instead of taking a single idol route reflects the producers' full exploration and rational use of the marketing of the value idol group model, that is, the integration of role popularity is realized through the commercial measures of "one belt and many sales" [5]. When Cat's Ear Entertainment planned LASER and MANTA, all members made their debut in the form of virtual idol groups, and the fan names and supporting colors of the two groups were also decided by public voting. In addition, Cat Ear has planned a five-season group ensemble, which continuously deepens the fans' personal memory of each member through continuous interactive variety shows, including group variety shows such as LASER Debut Day, Dangerous Life, WE FOUR, FINE DAY and Let's Start Together. Individual members will also participate in guest appearances in various radio dramas planned by Cat Ear, which not only strengthens users' awareness and attention to members, but also expands their understanding of LASER and MANTA as a whole. For example, Lin Zhi, a member of LASER, hides his dislike of "cyber violence" in his personal profile, responds to his personal design in the group comprehensive planning and single creation, has a music "Warning Line" to resist "cyber violence", and cooperates with another virtual idol men's team. MANTA's creation of "WHY" is a typical case in which Lin Zhi drives two groups. The "One Belt and Many" bundling marketing makes these two virtual idol men's teams successful. In addition, members of various virtual groups open personal Weibo accounts on social media, and the multi-level fission of Weibo makes the information spread fission among members of virtual idol groups, between members and fans, and between fans and fans, which accelerates the amplification. Not only on the cat's ear platform, but also on other social media platforms, it also accompanies fans in all directions, providing emotional companionship anytime and anywhere.

2.2. Real empowerment: the second blessing of high-quality CV

2.2.1. Real voice dubbing: the "creator" of professional groups

The characters created by virtual reality technology and the voice of real voice actor (CV) are the core elements of virtual idols. Among them, the "sound" as the soul of the virtual idol is completed by many professional voice actors, transforming the visual real idol into an audible virtual idol. Today's Cat Ear FM is an audio platform

adapted from IP network literature for secondary creation, and its positioning is "voice from the second dimension". It is mainly aimed at people who like Animation, comics, Game (ACG) and provides users with some audio novels, audio comics, radio dramas and other content. It is a radio App that integrates barrage, sound and pictures. With the development of virtual idols, the virtual idol ensemble opened by Cat's Ear Entertainment still follows its platform characteristics, mainly displaying virtual idols through CV dubbing. The change of sound gives life to virtual idols. If the sound source is taken as the standard, virtual idols can be divided into two types: speech synthesis and seiyuu dubbing. LASER and MANTA rely on voice actors to dub, and singles, ensemble, anniversary live broadcast and even drop benefits are all done by professional voice actors. Being the behind-the-scenes manipulator of virtual idols gives life and soul to the characters.

2.2.2. Two-way interaction: the mix and match of foreground and background

Erving Goffman introduced the word "stage" in drama performance in *Self-Presentation in Daily Life*, and put forward the theory of drama imitation, pointing out that human performance field is similar to "stage" and divided it into foreground and background. The front desk is an institutionalized social existence, and people usually play an idealized and socialized self to a certain extent; Background activities break the restrictions of rules and regulations, and more are the spontaneous disclosure of the subject and the self [6]. Compared with general virtual idols, producers can hide CV to satisfy the mystery of virtual idols, but LASER and MANTA launched by Cat's Ear Entertainment break this tradition. The image of "paper man" in front of the screen remains its idealized membership as the "front desk" for front-end display, while CV, as the "background" behind the scenes, does not hide its identity and participates in the construction of virtual idols in the front desk. For example, Jiang Ke, a member of MANTA, and Zhang Fuzheng, a voice actor, will interact with each other to send blessings and love each other on their birthdays, and other members of the group will also comment on Gai Lou, so as to break through the barriers between the foreground and the background and break the "deity" of virtual idols and the mystery of voice actors.

3. The surreality under the cover: the simulacra dilemma of virtual idol groups

3.1 The "fans" of virtual idols are alienated

With the development of mass media, people are increasingly facing the risk of being alienated by social media. People are excessively addicted to the mimicry environment created by mass media, and rely on the content spread by social media, which makes the public have mental dependence and behavioral inertia, and the

role of active production and consumption has been alienated into a puppet controlled and enslaved by the media [7]. Virtual idols still belong to idols in essence. The psychological behavior of fans pursuing idols is not only "generating electricity for love", but also the projection of emotional value, and regards "he" as my ideal me or my ideal "him". Freud believes that psychological projection belongs to a psychological defense mechanism, which means that when an individual's ego is depressed by the ID and superego and feels anxious, he shifts the cause of this anxiety to others or other objective factors [8].

Cat's Ear Entertainment is well versed in the preferences of the second-generation youth group, and gives full play to the entertainment and companionship of the platform. LASER and MANTA are two virtual idol men's groups created by Maoer based on their own characteristics. They have handsome looks, distinctive people's designs, ups and downs, and group variety of dramatic conflicts, which meet the fans' idolize goal of "not falling down" idols, and show the virtual idol men's groups the charm of "people" as much as possible through virtual boyfriends, wake-up calls, charging prompts and holiday benefits, and provide fans with virtual happiness and happiness. Idolize fans are addicted to the long-term and stable accompanying emotional experience provided by virtual idols, and more and more like to immerse themselves in the virtual world created by machines. They like to be alone, and their emotional fluctuations follow the output of virtual idols, venting their emotions in the program barrage or comment area of virtual idols, but they are hidden in reality. In the long run, the feelings between people fade, and the fans in idolize gradually abandon the social essence of people and release or consume their emotions, becoming "one-way". For this reason, the platform spares no effort to extract the residual value of fans. In order to gain emotional experience, the fan groups comprehensively brush the broadcast volume for the virtual idol group, and use their own social networks to promote publicity on major social platforms and support them. However, the audience didn't realize that they were alienated, and they were still trapped in the trap of holding the initiative of virtual idols to debut and even go out of the circle. They became digital workers of the platform, and were virtually squeezed out of surplus value by the capital platform.

3.2. IP long tail spread bundled fan consumption

Baudrillard believes that when the social productive forces are surplus and it is necessary to find a way out, consumer culture comes into being. Consumer culture is a culture that seeks meaning and basis for consumer behavior, and it is a culture that stimulates and creates consumer desires. Consumer culture has changed the relationship between people and things in the past, and the practical view of consumption has gradually declined, while the consumption of meaning and value has been increasing [9]. Nowadays, the public is familiar with the content payment mode of major social media platforms, and the content output of the platforms is gradually enriched and

diversified. Not only do they have diverse content themes, but artificial intelligence and virtual reality technology have further developed into an IP-based industrial chain in the secondary field, including IP derivatives such as the live broadcast of the dubbing actor for the first anniversary of the establishment of LASER, the signature photos of members of LASER and MANTA, and virtual concerts.

With the consumption upgrade of the cultural and entertainment industry, the explosion of the virtual idol men's team is inseparable from the spending of fanatical fans and the bundled consumption of the platform. Cat Ear launched the IP-based long tail communication of the virtual idol men's group LASER and MANTA, which brought huge business opportunities. Because the group ensemble of LASER and MANTA was broadcast free of charge on the cat ear platform, its music singles were also broadcast free of charge on major music platforms, and the "krypton gold" for fans turned into IP derivatives for buying virtual idols. Because virtual idols exist in the "surreal" world, for fans, showing the "symbolic consumption" of virtual idol entities has become the main goal of fan idolize. Therefore, the series of major singles of LASER and MANTA in Maoer Mall (color paper, badges, standing cards, photo cards, tinplates, laser tickets, etc.), members' birthdays and song albums have become "kryptonite" for fans. Fans are gradually attracted by the symbolic "paper people" of virtual idols, and invest emotion, trust and money in virtual idols. Fans stimulate group identity when interacting with groups, and stimulate consumption desire with their own emotional value. As Baudrillard said, the consumer society can arouse everyone's desire for materialized social myths.

3.3. Pink circle thinking to break the virtual idol utopia

The development of idols is inseparable from the help and support of fans. Virtual idols, as a kind of idols in essence, are still inseparable from fans' pursuit. As a secondary culture, fans of virtual idols prefer "enclosure and self-sprouting", and there are few cases of pink circle wars. In addition, compared with real-life idols, virtual idols rarely appear negative news because of their own misconduct, which destroys their image in the hearts of fans and is dubbed "the idol that never collapses". LASER and MANTA, the virtual idols created by Cat Ear, are non-physical "paper people". At the beginning of their establishment, they opened official accounts in Weibo, publicly solicited opinions from fans, determined the group names and supporting colors of fans, opened Weibo dialect for their fan communities, and strengthened communication between idols and fans, fans and fans. However, the flow of the virtual idol itself and the fans of the voice actors behind the idol broke the illusion of utopia of the virtual idol fans. Michel Desai, a French scholar, called the active reading behavior of fans "poaching" [10]. In the hyperbole, the "fan creative group" painted, edited, created videos, and wrote colleagues, actively and spontaneously "produced food", while ordinary fans enthusiastically "begged for food" to seek something that

brought them pleasure and spread it again, and fans realized the transformation from "poacher" to "creator". Cat Ear Platform is the main derivative of American culture, and the strong intention of female fans to "take CP" is amplified after being influenced by the commercial development of CP fan culture, and it is a pairing combination of any two in the virtual idol men's team, for example, "Wen Gu Zhi Xin" (Gu Ziyao X Lin Zhi), "Han Jiang Bai Ying" (Bai Wen X Jiang Ke) and "No season is unique" (Ji Shao Yi X Lin Shu).

Virtual idols are artificially created "speaking and singing" virtual beings through computer technology, speech synthesis and other means [11]. As the backstage staff of the "backstage", voice actors should make a good distinction between the idols of the "foreground" and keep a sense of mystery. However, when planning these two groups of virtual idol men's groups, Cat's Ear Entertainment did not hide the voice actors behind each member, so fans shifted their love for the voice actors to their love for the virtual idols they voiced, which made fans mistakenly graft the "pink circle" of the real voice actors to the "pink circle" of the virtual idol group, breaking the "utopian" picture of the virtual idol pink circle painted by the false simulacra for fans. For example, Jin Xian, a member of MANTA, and Gu Jiangshan, a voice of Xu Xiang'an, the CP powder of the two voice actors brought real people's emotions into the virtual idol ensemble, and fanatical fans destroyed the original virtual idol image by brushing barrage, brushing comments, writing humanities and other forms, breaking the illusion of "super-reality" of virtual idols.

4. The star cluster of the "meta-universe": the simulated future of virtual idol groups

4.1. With the help of the "meta-universe", expand the spread of images

With the change of Internet information technology and the development of digital economy, technologies such as 5G+AI, AR/VR, and holographic images are constantly developing, and the "meta-universe" connecting the physical world and the virtual world has become a craze in recent two years. Under the development prospect of the meta-universe, "digital people" with "beautiful skins" and "interesting souls" have become the consumption hotspots of Z-era audiences. At present, the products of the virtual idol industry are more subdivided, the development model is more mature, and the marketing channels are more diversified. Under the idolize craze of the second-generation youth group, virtual idols gradually break through the circle barriers and enter the public. In the digital age, images have become the main way of information dissemination. Compared with real idols in concerts, virtual idols in users' mobile phones are more "within reach". LASER and MANTA, the first virtual idol men's groups in China launched by Cat's Ear Entertainment, quickly opened the market and started the

virtual voice-controlled star-making mode by virtue of the "east wind" of the meta-universe.

4.2. Extend the IP industry chain to meet individual needs

LASER and MANTA are virtual idol men's groups created by Cat's Ear Entertainment, which have the virtual "paper man" image of character cards. With the development of 5G+VR technology, Cat Ear has continuously started the experiment of virtual idols coming onto the stage. As a virtual idol, it is inseparable from the basic function of idols to sing and dance. The music singles released by two groups of men's groups are also equipped with plot songs, plot PV (Promotion Video) and other multi-category outputs. Providing benefits for fans when celebrating the 1000th day of LASER's founding, and releasing the first 3D stage version of The Temptation of Suspect A, although due to technical reasons, the character modeling of individual members is quite different from the original "paper man" image, it still gains the love and encouragement of many fans. Satisfy the entertainment psychology of fans through out-of-the-box songs or stages. The sound output depends on voice actors, while the image output depends on technicians. This breakthrough IP industrial chain expansion meets the needs of many fans and enhances the popularity of virtual idols through the second circle.

4.3. Distinguish between reality and unreality, building a "man in the middle" barrier

Voice control can not be separated from the voice blessing of high-quality voice actors to the virtual idol men's team. Unlike Hatsune Miku, Tianyi Luo and other virtual singers, LASER and MANTA created by Cat Ear Entertainment are more like dolls in costumes in amusement parks. They don't rely on AI voice synthesis technology to make sounds, but through motion capture and LIVE2D and 3D technologies, professional voice actors play virtual roles and voice their actions. This behind-the-scenes actor is called "the man in the middle". As a performer of the "backstage" of virtual idols, "People in China" should be different from virtual idols because its own work focus is not on playing virtual idols. For example, Jiang Guangtao, a voice actor, was arrested on suspicion of a criminal offence, and many of his voices were forced to stop updating or replacing the voice actor, so that many fans launched a boycott, "preferring to stop working rather than AI or replace people", and fans grafted their admiration for the voice actor to their love for the virtual idol, deconstructing the charm of the virtual idol itself. LASER and MANTA, as well-known virtual idol men's groups under cat's ear entertainment, should also properly construct the barrier of "people in China" to virtual idols, and maintain the "openness" of virtual idols and the "mystery" of voice actors.

5. Conclusion

From the glory of the king's virtual idol men's team and bilibili's virtual concert, to iQiyi's virtual band and virtual idol variety show, to Byte and Lehua's cross-dimensional virtual idol group A-SOUL, and the voice control created by Cat Ear Entertainment to virtual idol men's teams LASER and MANTA, the development and operation of virtual idols in China have been gradually upgraded. In the digital age, short videos, live broadcasts, digital people, virtual idols and other graphic content are flooded with social media. The public is also "entertained" by capital while entertaining themselves on social platforms. The "surreality"[12] constructed in the era of simulacra needs us to constantly think deeply. Driven by the wave of the meta-universe, the voice-activated virtual idol created by cat ears should also be explored in improving 3D imaging technology, extending the IP industry chain and building the barrier of "people in China". In order to move towards an open and inclusive metacosmic world, the future of virtual idols still has a long way to go.

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