

MMORPG Avatars: Representations of Escapism in Chinese Society Based on Semiotics of Culture

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

The development of Internet technology and globalization have boosted the game industry, and among which Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) provide a space where players could create their own avatar at will, and generate their physical and psychological involvement to participate in the virtual experience of the game context. Through cases with semiotics analysis and cultural phenomenon, the correlation between in-game avatar and escapism in Chinese context would be examined on how do in-game avatars connect with escapism in China. This highly resilient virtual social space provides a malleable field far from reality, for the transition from culture to nature, from reality to illusion, and from self to digital self. By analyzing the correlation and rooted reasons between in-game avatar in MMORPGs and escapism in Chinese social context, this project will contribute to the re-understanding of the symbolic meaning of in-game avatars and realistic meaning in Chinese society.

Keywords: MMORPG; avatar; escapism

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Introduction

In 2016, 58.com (58 同城), a Chinese company committed to local community and free classified information services, implement the “996” working rules to full staff, which means that the working time starts from 9 am till 9 pm in 6 working days every week, no overtime allowance, and no leave is allowed. This kind of forced overtime behavior was exposed on the Internet and was criticized by netizens, however, instead of being promptly repealed, more companies followed suit. In 2019, more Chinese companies such as Huawei (华为), Ali(阿里), JD(京东), Suning(苏宁), Pinduoduo(拼多多) were exposed that more overtime work and was added in the list of 996 companies.

The continuous heated discussion around 996 working rules and lives of individuals reveals that, with the rapid development of China's economy and society, 996 working rules are not unique to Internet companies, but has become the norm and prevailing label of labor, especially young employees, for self-mockery that reluctant to work overtime but have to. The demands of various subjects on labor efficiency are rising, and the industry competition is becoming more and more intense. Competitive pressure has transmitted to the working field, resulting in the working overtime phenomenon of employed labor became pervasive. By using data from large-scale national surveys, scholars have systematically discussed questions about the current situation of overtime among young people, what affects youth working overtime, and whether overtime working rules affects sense of happiness, gain and security. Empirical research indicates that, at present, young labor working overtime phenomenon is widespread, and there are 53.3% of Chinese young people work more than 40 hours a week. Among the involuntary overtime group, 49.8% of young people believe that overtime is a company rule, in violation of the company's rules, and 19.8% are forced to follow the "overtime subculture" and 12% say overtime is a hidden rule for promotion. The study also suggests that overtime work squeezes the well-being of working youth and is prone to higher relative deprivation, impairing job acquisition and reducing health and security (聂伟,风笑天, 2020). There have also been studies on the overtime problems faced by employees of Chinese enterprises affecting their work and life experience, and the impact of working and living satisfaction in working hours has been verified using Probit models of 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data. The

results show that the effect of working hours on working and living satisfaction is negative. The influences are in three aspects: individual psychology, individual physiological, work and family affairs. Although only increasing working hours in low-income groups can lift their income, salaries can change the negative effect of working hours on job satisfaction, which does not exist in the effect of working hours on life satisfaction (马翩翩, 吕学梁, 2020).

In China, the existence of the “996” work mode has its deep reasons and realistic basis. Marx had a detailed analysis of the working day issue in *The Capital*, and it is believed that there is a "right conflict" between labor and capital on the issue of working days, and the comparison of power between labor and capital is a key factor affecting working hours (马克思 · 2004). The extension of working hours of Chinese workers is closely related to the process of market reform. With the deepening of marketization and the expansion of opening to the outside world, the non-public economy has developed rapidly. In order to maximize profits, business owners always extend workers' working hours and increase their labor intensity as much as possible. In the context of the common development of multiple ownership, the relatively low level of labor productivity, the long-term imbalance between supply and demand in the labor market and the low degree of worker organization together weaken the bargaining power of workers on the issue of working pressure.

Under the stress from all sides, people turn to the virtual space for entertainment and release, including online games. The real life of individuals is closely related to their dependence on virtual world (Leung, L., 2007). Globally speaking, in 2020, gamers reported their longest consecutive playing session lasted four hours, 36 minutes, a seven percent increase over 2019. In the U.S., Japan and Germany, the binge-watching times are longest at over four hours (Charlie Kraus, 2020). In China, affected by COVID-19 in the first half of the year, the entertainment demand has grown monthly with user expansion (Gamedata, 2020), which illustrates that the role of digital game has been increasingly important as a way of personal information access and lifestyle, at the same time, the relationship between social psychological pressure and the individual's motivation to escape to online games cannot be ignored. The primary purpose of this article is to verify the existence of this connection through the presentation of the in-game avatars.

1. Literature review

Game studies, for now, as scholars emphasized, require an interdisciplinarity, which are relevant to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, as well as the Internet, mass communication, and psychology. The theoretical research on games has also been deepened with the continuous the game industry expansion. Often caught up in a defensive rhetoric, game studies marked the field as a kind of early 21st century cure to a perceived late 20th century decline in the relevance and reach of the humanities (Heineman, D. S., 2014). Focusing on the perspective of social psychology, questions are raised: what does it means when people choose their avatars? Is game still the kind of mass communication in the traditional sense? The new perspective of game as a kind of media is waiting to be explored, and the linkage of in-game presenting and social psychology are thus to be explored.

Tracing the development history of MMORPG, the first predecessor, Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) was *Ultima Online* in 1997, as tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) and text-based online games known as *Multiuser Dungeons* brings MMOGs the roots of development into Role-playing Games (RPG), as Corneliussen, Hilde G, Rettberg, Jill Walker has argued. For example, in 2008, the book *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity* analyze the gaming context in MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, and interdisciplinary theories and research methods were employed, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and communication, which increasingly formed a trend in ludology study.

Under the branch of these MMOGs, Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games are the focus of this paper. This type of games is typical for “role-playing” participation, which contribute to mental engagement during playing, which forms a prominent factor that may occur in the in-game social relationship. A “massive” game gives the possible popularity for interaction, and “role-playing” process builds distinct driving force to social connection. In MMORPGs’ culture, a virtual world view is built through its internal settings, and players can select and customize the three-dimensional image - avatar, small pictures or icons that represent a computer user in an online social network or a game (Vavilova, Z., 2015), that will represent them on the screen to enhance the sense of substitution and the rebuildable identity.

MMORPGs create a borderless, open, free, anonymous virtual imaginary space-time, so that people can engage in exploration, communication, competition, interaction, and construction of identity and other social behavior (黄少华, 2008). The rich diversity of features attracts more and more people, especially young people to participate in it, and the convenient access provide chances for players to manage special interpersonal relationships through role-playing in the game, to obtain different mental needs and a variety of real emotions.

Avatar's customizable, role-playing attributes give players the ability to “take control of their own character's destiny” and devote themselves to a world that is committed to their own feelings, writing individual narratives through performance, experience, and feeling. That is the reason why MMORPGs are charming that even make players indulge with them. The boundary between reality and virtual is gradually blurred and melted, while the game is more than a game but a real socialized space intermediated by avatars.

1.1. Virtual avatar: interpretation of the concept

The term avatar is derived from Sanskrit and refers to the appearance of God on the ground in the form of flesh (邱梦婷, 2019). In the early research on film role identification, Maccoby and Wilson (1957) defined avatar as “the audience placing themselves in another role in their fantasy and feeling what this role is going through”. With the development of network information technology, behaviors such as social entertainment take place in the virtual environment – film, drama, TV, and other media space. Livingstone (1999) made definition of TV avatars: the audience imagines that they are seeing the world through his or her eyes in someone's body. In a recent Chinese study of Wechat, the avatar is regarded as the user's self-defined user name, character and body narrative under the framework of information technology (牡丹,陈霖, 2020).

The first related research on game avatars appeared in 1985, Chip Morningstar and Joseph Romero created the on-screen display that used the word “avatar” to denote users when they designed *Habitat*, Lucas Film’s online role-playing game, and they defined personal avatars (ie, on-screen representatives of technical experts) as the

ability to review facilities and procedures from remote personal locations (Daglas, 2012). In the 21st century, various games emerged in, fueled by the development of media technology. Researchers pointed out that, in contemporary games, avatar has progressed from rough icons to comprehensive avatars that convey personality, emotion, and purpose, by summarizing the changes in game characteristics with *PacMan*, *Lara Croft*, and *Star Wars Galaxy* as examples. In addition, there are more games offering a wide range of options for their characters, including gender, appearance, occupation, and clan (Lim & Reeves, 2009). They also pointed out that different avatars may have various innate talents and capacity, such as strength, intelligence, and magical power with diverse efficacy. As the game unfolds, players are given opportunities to change and acquire new traits and get customized to decorating their avatars to distinguish them from other players' avatars by all possible ways such as in-game tasks, social interaction, and spending money. The selected avatar itself, becomes the representation of "I" in the game directly, so that empower players to demonstrate their unique personality, manner and morality by selecting and personalizing their incarnations in the game world. Focusing on the research of MMORPG's avatar itself, most scholars also explore the relationship between visual avatar and player behavior from a psychological perspective. Many studies have investigated the psychological issues involved in MMORPGs, in particular the factors underlying the choice and manipulation of avatars (Lim & Reeves, 2009), pointing out that avatar choice and visual point of view (POV) are media elements that have special bearing on the sense of self-involvement, and the avatar visually determines how players are represented in the gaming environment as well as how the game environment is presented to them.

With the development of online games, more and more disciplines have begun to intervene in this field, and games are no longer just regarded as a temporary medium, but more as a new social place. Scholars began to pay attention to the online and offline social interaction, as well as the influence relationship between the two by doing research mostly focusing on MMORPG and social games. However, most of the existing research has focused on psychology and behavior to examine the relationship between self and avatar, including the study of Avatar Identification (or Character Identification), emphasizing that individuals incorporate avatar characteristics into self-concept; the study of Self-presence focuses on individuals experiencing the virtual avatar in a

sensory and non-sensory way as a mental state of self-realization; the study of Character Attachment emphasizes that players and characters form a close emotional connection through long-term interaction with the character's emotional investment (邱梦婷, 2019). Generally speaking, most of the theoretical research on avatar involves many psychological aspects such as cognition, emotion, and self.

As for Avatar Identification, this concept originated from Freud's concept of identity, which is the process of forming personality through role-playing (邱梦婷, 2019). Oatley (2009) believes that role of avatars in literature refers to readers experiencing fictional events from the perspective of the protagonist and producing corresponding emotional reactions. Synthesizing past literature, Cohen (2001) summarized media role identification as the process of the audience's perception of the role, the internalization of the role's goal, and the emotional cognition of the role during the viewing process, and a short-term loss of self-consciousness. He believes that role identification can be measured from four aspects: empathy with the role, understanding of the role emotionally and cognitively, perception of the role's perspective and goals, and the degree of loss of self-consciousness. Although these concepts are different, scholars have all reached a consensus on role identification, which leads to changes in role perspectives and emotions. Avatar Identification study has been done by scholars through online questionnaire method, sampled 845 MMORPG players consisting of a short version of the Big Five Personality Inventory and an avatar identification scale, and four discrepancy profiles (idealised, actualized, alter ego, negative hero) common to the personality factors extroversion, consciousness, agreeableness and emotional stability and stable within players emerged (Mancini & Sibilla, 2017).

Combining the characteristics of the game itself, scholars puts forward the Player-avatar Identification Theory based on the theory of Avatar Identification: Avatar identification is a social psychological phenomenon related to the self-perception and identity of media users (Klimmt C, Hefner D, Vorderer P, et al., 2010). Specifically, these studies of avatar reinforce the fact that the onscreen characters are surrogates for players, which builds a space for players to express their emotions and convey their consciousness.

The presentation of game avatars as a sense of self-presence is also one of the important viewpoints in the study of avatars. Scholars have discussed the definition of

avatar, as the virtual self-presentation of individuals in video games (Yee& Bailenson, 2007), and also a substitution of the actual self and an important part of individual identity (Gee, 2003). It is an important way for individuals to perform role-playing, participate in and experience the virtual game environment. Scholars have also discussed possibilities for players to identify with their avatars as either an experience of “being” the character or by feeling empathy toward the character, including the relation of appearance and capacity of the character in the game (Tronstad R., 2009), as well as the emotional connection in naming the character (Charlotte Hagström, 2009).

When it comes to Character Attachment, emotional connection through long-term interaction are emphasized. According to David Buckingham, the fundamental difference between games and other kinds of cultural texts is that games are played (Buckingham, 2006:6). The virtual world that MMORPGs constructed is aimed to be participated, with specific culture and order. The role-playing behavior allows full sensory participation – when experiencing the game itself, the interpretation of the virtual identity is building up, which goes back to the loop of immersion and sense of belonging to the in-game experience. A Chinese study proved this idea, examined that there is a significant positive correlation between role attachment and online game customization and loyalty. Role attachment plays a complete intermediary role between online game customization and online game loyalty. Incarnation has an important influence on online game loyalty, and this influence is through the role The mediating role of attachment is realized (杨雪, 魏华,周宗奎,牛更枫,何灿, 2013).

The interaction with the game avatar establishes a close connection between the individual and the avatar (Klimmt, Hartmann, &Frey, 2007), and the increase in the self-relevance of an activity may be a psychological mechanism that chooses to increase intrinsic motivation and promote positive cognitive and emotional states. Most research on choice manipulates choice, making "self" the inner or "endogenous" of the task (Botti & Iyengar, 2004). Among those psychological driving reasons, escapism is an important factor that allow players to coordinate with their avatar. Scholars pointed out that escapism in MMORPGs is related to manipulate avatar in self-representations, and a larger time investment in the game, and excessive gaming time is a robust predictor of MMORPG-related problems (Kuss DJ, Louws J, Wiers RW., 2012), and this imprinting further deepens when game players invest significant psychological and monetary

resources to “nurture” the avatars by advancing them in the game and interacting with other players (Lim & Reeves, 2009). The differentiation of the main self (I) and the object self (me), the combination of actual embodiment and “incarnation” makes the body as the unity of the real and visible, and also the medium of communication as well as the knot of relations (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Frey, 2007).

1.2. Game studies: evolution of MMORPGs in China

In China, the legitimacy of entertainment is a set of things only appeared after the middle-class lifestyle was established and the social structure undergoes transformation. Before that change, entertainment, which collectively referred to Cultural and Art (文艺) at that time, was embedding into a huge revolution arrangement. After the reform and opening up in 1979, the system begun to change gradually. Hence, games, which represent the pleasure and entertainment, are actually part of conceptual history - Chinese people at that time, facing historical difficulties in survival and production, were unacceptable to gaming, which may not be directly social productive or revolutionary. Social stereotypes were thus constructed towards game. Labels such as ‘idlers’, ‘trifler’ or ‘chairwarmer’ are attached to game players, as well as the prejudice. There is still a question mark of the gaming till now, though it has grown in confidence and become more mainstream in modern society, or maybe people have vaguely glimpsed the potential connection between play and escapism. As scholars have discussed, since the act of gaming itself has a long association with leisure, adolescence, and public controversy, many gamers continue to struggle to claim a larger cultural legitimacy for their play from those outside of their immediate subculture (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Based on Chinese traditional culture, people’s social stereotypes of “games” have also undergone a relatively long process. Due to the influence of traditional Chinese values, “playing things to lose one's mind” makes many people feel disgusted with online games. In particular, some game contains violent and pornographic hints, which has a significant negative impact on minors, as well as negative reports of online games from news media have also emerged one after another, and the issue of Internet addiction has caused widespread social controversy. Therefore, Chinese society’s long-standing labelling and devaluation of “games” directly affect the development environment of the entire industry.

The development of games in China not only faced conceptual shackles, but also faces technological constraints. The earliest prototype of online games in China can be traced back to text-based Multi-User Dungeon or Dimension (MUD) and Online chess and card games, according to the definition of International Data Corporation (IDC China): "Online games are game projects that use TCP/IP protocol and rely on the Internet to participate in multiple people at the same time." Since 1998 to 2000, Relying on this kind of game platform, the online game market in China gradually expanded. In May 2001, Lianzhong World became the world's largest gaming website with 170,000 people online at the same time and approximately 20 million registered users. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, China's online games have not yet formed a clear operating model, and it is difficult to be called an "industry". It can be seen that China's game industry started later compared to the West. [参考文献?]

In recent years, with the improvement of the level of Chinese media technology, the game has also been greatly developed, and the number of online game players has increased dramatically, especially among role-playing online games. According to the "Seventh China Online Game Market Survey Report" (2008)(《第七届中国网络游戏市场调查报告》(2008)), the number one game type most liked by Chinese online game users in 2007 was role-playing online games, accounting for 31% of the market share in mainland China in 2007. The three online games are also role-playing online games. The "17173 8th China Online Game Market Survey Report" (2009) (17173 第8届中国网络游戏市场调查报告) shows that from the perspective of age's influence on users' choice of games, role-playing games are ranked as the first choice regardless of age group among all kinds of games, and role-playing games rank first with an overwhelming support rate of 84.4%. RPGs have become the most popular game type for players due to their strong interactivity, wide audience, and large number of players.

Although in the past 20 years, China's online games, especially role-playing games, have shown a blowout development trend, but there are few domestic research results on games, and there are lack of game researchers in China. Pointed by Chinese scholars, game researchers in are relatively young, with flexible vision and rich research directions, but also unstable. Game research is only a short-lived topic in China, and there are few continuous researchers (Bai & Song, 2009 出处? ? ?). In the 21st

century, although China's video game research has shown problems such as late start and insufficient research materials, there are still many researches worth mentioning, such as semiotic research and symbolic narratology study of game, game context and in-game context study, and study of digital entertainment industry. Citing the concept of the third field in sociology, Chinese scholars found that the social activities of players in the game mainly include cooperation, competition, and friendship. Players of each orientation also have different social needs(陈智先,李峻德, 2008). There was also researcher who believes that although the motivation of immersive players lacks long-term social expectations, once they integrate into the social circle of the game, they will participate in the game through cooperation and get rid of their loneliness, while social players will start from the beginning, and take an active part in the cooperation(钟智锦, 2010). Group activities in game socialization can relieve players' distress and meet the social needs of players seeking companionship on the basis of satisfying the efficiency of players' games (王利静, 2008).

For example, Chinese MMORPG Moonlight Blade provide fixed but diverse character options with distinct appearance features as well as their different use of weapons, and based on the settings of the in-game world view and imagination, it provides virtual reality for players, who are virtually present in the game space. The size, dimension, and the distance between players and this space depend on the audio-visual experience provided by the digital screen of the online game, which is the virtual field for social reaction.

Generally speaking, game has developed for a short time in China, and the research of game studies was initiated recently, focusing mainly at categorization and identification. After the leaping development of cultural industry has become a national development strategy in China, online game has been placed in the limelight and gained a certain degree of legitimacy within mainstream symbolic meaning, reflecting the change of China's entertainment concept. The game industry is still being supposed to prove its legitimacy - it is precisely because of this that Chinese society has given a lot of negative labels to games, which also makes it possible to associate games with escapism. It can be seen that role-playing games are due to their plump role modeling, fun gameplay design. The existence of virtual social space in type MMORPG has attracted a large number of scholars to study. However, by combing the previous

studies, we can find that there are few studies on the influence of game avatars, and there is also a lack of studies on the social psychology and escapism.

1.3. Escapism: Chinese players and social psychology

In psychology, escape is a term of Horney's theory, referring to the psychological phenomenon that people cannot consciously resolve but easily escape when conflicts occur between people and society and others in real life (林崇德, 杨治良, 黄希庭, 2003), emphasizes the psychological tendency of being unwilling to accept the status quo when being treated unfairly and being too restricted. Comparing to escape, escapism also respects individuality, but as a category of humanistic geography, it does not emphasize character structure and psychological processes, but focuses more on discussing the relationship between man and space based on culture, and pays attention to people's attitudes towards all objective existences around them (许源, 汤玲玲, 张凯, & 李怡萌, 2019).

In China, economy has entered a new stage of development, and the economic and industrial structure is in a period of transformation for optimization and upgrading, while employment shows a severe situation. The social background of market economy, economic globalization and network informatization has exacerbated the psychological dilemma of pressure and escapism.

Despite of "996" mode, we could also get a glimpse of the social pressure from the changes of employment system. The social structure was stable during the planned economy in the past, and people's position in society was fixed and programmed. When China adopted a unified policy for recruitment, distribution and employment, there was a little autonomy in choosing jobs, and a dependency relationship was formed between the employee and the unit. After the establishment of the socialist market economy system, the market economy has gradually been improved and developed. The shackles of the planned economy were broken and have turned to self-development, self-selection, and self-responsibility. However, the open and competitive characteristics of the market economy have also increased the difficulty of employment. Employees are independent on the one hand when choosing jobs, and on the other hand they are lonely and helpless with hesitation and anxiety facing a severe employment situation. People are

often in a state of isolation and helplessness in the process of choosing a career. “Everything he can do is like a soldier who is ordered to march and a worker who works on a bus going with the flow” (弗洛姆, 2002).

Globalization and informatization have also exacerbated the anxiety and stress of our society (刘延宣,马洪彦,张鹤, 2021). The spread of globalization has empowered information to cross national borders and gradually expand the scope, from a single economic field to political and cultural fields. This change in the world and social environment has flooded China society as well, with all kinds of thoughts, cultures, and mixed information. “Despite material prosperity, political and economic freedom” (弗洛姆, 1989:78), the mental confusion of the youth will make them at a loss in self-positioning.

When social psychology and pressure are applied to individuals, MMORPGs with coexistence attributes of sociality, instant interactivity and role-playing opportunities become a possible way out (邱梦婷,2019). Regarding role-playing games, most scholars have similar definitions of their technology. They believe that at the technical level, role-playing games are a kind of entertainment based on information technology. On the definition of other levels, scholars have diverse views. Kim et al (2005) believe that in role-playing games, players can directly influence the plot and create a variety of stories. Researcher also believes that role-playing games are where players play roles during the game, and players play certain plot games by playing a specific role (杨崇安, 2005). Through the virtual world created by the game, players can obtain experiences that cannot be obtained in reality, and satisfy illusions and wishes that cannot be satisfied in reality. Niedner (2006) believes that role-playing games have six important elements, namely, the ability to choose your favorite character, having attractive characters, low risk of failure and low damage to failure, rich reward and task system, reasonable guild interaction mechanism, a stable economic system, a powerful and reasonable punishment mechanism, these elements together constitute a role-playing game, making it an independent game style; and role-playing games need to have a rich storyline, missions, and growth and rewards for completing challenges. Chinese researchers believe that role-playing games give players a dual identity experience, including the real self and the self in the game (巢乃鹏, 马晓菲, 2016). When users are immersed in the game world, they can temporarily escape from the worries in the real world, vent and

promote Personality in the game world. Although researchers have different perspectives on the definition of role-playing games, they all believe that it involves elements such as roles, plots, and game worlds. Therefore, the role-playing games in this study are summarized as: the player uses electronic equipment as the carrier to experience the game plot by controlling a character in the game, so that it can grow and complete a series of goals.

Therefore, when social psychology and pressure are exerted on individuals, MMORPGs with co-existing attributes of social nature, instant interaction, and role-playing opportunity becomes a possible outlet. Chinese people's habit of loving social interaction is greatly reflected in online games, and the huge social psychological pressure caused by the rapid economic development also requires proper venting channels, which are conducive to the development of online games.

To reflect the underlying dynamics behind human behavior, psychologists have constructed the concept of motivation, which drives individual behavior, as one of the most basic assumptions of psychology. In recent years, more and more foreign researchers and a few domestic researchers began to explore the problems related to online games from the perspective of motivation. A large number of studies have found that stressful life events, social support, interpersonal relationships, and real-life needs are all associated with higher levels of Internet use (Leung, L., 2007; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009). Through rigorous data analysis and reliability and validity tests, Stanford University scholar believes that the motivations of online game players mainly include the following: Achievement motivation, to obtain honors and achievements in the virtual world; social motivation, to conduct social interactions in the game world and develop social networks; immersion motivation, to immerse in the virtual world and escape the troubles and problems in the real world (Yee, 2006). These three different motivations are not mutually exclusive, that is, the same player may have one or more of these three motivations at the same time, but different players will have different emphasis on the most important motivation. Foreign studies have found that escapism in online game motivation has the strongest predictive effect on addiction (Yee, 2006). Researchers also found a positive link between enjoyment, escapism, social communication and the pursuit of achievement and game intent in online gaming motivation (Wu, Wang, & Tsai, 2010). Stress Demand Theory (Murray, 1938) believes that stress will induce the generation of motivation, and Self-Avoidance Theory (Baumeister, 1990) also believes

that stress is one of the important reasons that cause individuals to avoid themselves as well.

Although motivation and online game psychology and behavior are very closely related, but only a small number of domestic research attention to the motivation of the game intention and the impact of addiction (张红霞, 谢毅, 2008).

Based on these, this project intends to discuss the deep-rooted psychological media elements, and the relationship between MMORPG avatar and escapism as a micro-cultural phenomenon, and to set this connection in the context of Chinese society: why there is escapism presented by avatars, and what the characteristics are of this avatar-based escapism.

2. Semiology measures of avatars

This analysis would employ semiology and narratology analysis methods to discuss the specific avatars in MMORPGs, incorporate with non-verbal, non-narrative cultural phenomenon to make supportive analysis. Players in common-interest games use cognitive strategies such as imitation, analogy, reasoning, guessing, imagination and common knowledge (Pietarinen, A.-V., 2007). Saussure (1916/1967) defined duality as “the linguistic sign [i.e., symbol] is a mental entity with two faces: a concept [meaning] and an acoustic image [sound]. These two elements are tightly joined and one demands the other [bidirectional mapping].” Semiology study offers a chance to understand the research object more objectively and systematically.

2.1. Categories and characteristics

The relationship between technology and society needs to be emphasized, as well as for individuals, and this interactivity is much stronger when compared to any other media. According to the concept of ‘active audience’, a video game’s active audience is constantly ‘reallocating formal properties according to their own particular personal and play contexts’ (Bogost, 2009). The player-centered position approaches typically position themselves as repudiations of research concerning video games’ formal or structural properties (Behrenshausen, B.G., 2012). Yet the active audience is inadequate to explain the complex experience of game playing, because a player is not only interpreting, but also creating and interacting, not only interacting with the game itself, but also interacts with other players and various social elements. Games are ‘fairly formal structures that in complex ways spawn and feed player experiences’ (Juul, 2001) Secondly, the narrative structural configuration of a game, with its unique culture, could be reconstructed by the integrate participation of its audience. By interpreting the game characters and narrative structure in the interactive mode set by the rules, game audience also experience them, both through an interpretation of meaning and their physical feeling. The full intervention of the body enriches one’s body and sensory system into integrate mobilization, and thus the body experience of participation is prominent than activities through other media. Just as Merleau-Ponty has pointed out, body are presenting and speaking in other to manifest the ability, and ultimately the thoughts and intentions would be expressed (Merleau-Ponty M., 2001:256).

According to Postman, the era dominated by print media could be called “the era of interpretation”, electronic media represents “the age of entertainment”, and the new media represented by the Internet has the characteristics of "producer text", which promotes the identity transformation, from the only recipients of native game culture to producers and disseminators of games. Through the role-play behavior, the switch from a virtual identity and the real one can be easily accomplished by the player. MMORPGs, work rather than a game platform offering entertainment and leisure, but more as media for digital-self in extension, in physical feelings, identity recognition, and emotional identification.

The game we play are well designed with its materiality, and within that materialistic space, relations would occur. The technical condition, culture, and system, are embodied within the configuration, which could be both microcosmic and macroscopic: explicitly, all audience are enrolled, by default to follow the principles the game has configured in the system, the contexts, the tasks and rewards, the rules and so on; implicitly, there are broader context behind the configuration, the logic of industry and market, or the supervision and regulation of the society. The reconstruction of digital-self extension happens on those two levels, where the order is highly structured.

Hence, based on the in-game rule, the narrative, and the avatar, the collection of symbols, the categories of avatar analysis can be divided into several dimensions as well as the perceptual knowledge of the avatar:

avatar sign	career	weapon	skill	Representative color	appearance	nature
gaming rule	Cognitive rules	body rules	body rules	visual rules	visual rules	cognitive rules

Chart 1. The semiotic dimensions of avatar and gaming rule

2.2. Analytical strategies

15 examples of avatars in three MMORPGs would be taken into the paper, to make clarification of the process to analyzing the correlation and the rooted reasons between in-game avatar in MMORPGs and escapism in Chinese social context.

MMORPGs are selected from China Game Industry Annual Conference (年度中国游戏

产业年会) 2019 – 2020, hosted by the Game Publishing Committee, China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association (中国音数协游戏工委).

2019			2020		
Name of the game	English name	MMO RPG	Name of the game	English name	MMO RPG
逆水寒	Justice	√	古剑网络版	Gu Jian Qi Tan Online	√
剑侠情缘网络版叁	JX3 Online	√	天涯明月刀OL	Moonlight Blade Online	√
最终幻想 14	Final Fantasy XIV:A Realm Reborn	√	逆水寒	Justice	√
坦克世界	World of Tanks	Third person shooting	神武 4 电脑版	Shen Wu 4	Turn-based role-playing game
征途 2	Zheng Tu 2	√	原神	Genshin Impact	Action role-playing game
诛仙 3	Zhu Xian 3	√	健身环大冒险	Ring Fit Adventure	Motion sensing adventure game
梦想世界	Meng Xiang Shi Jie	√	刀塔	Dota	Multiplayer online battle arena
天涯明月刀OL	Moonlight Blade Online	√	梦三国 2	Dream Three Kingdoms 2	Strategy
新天龙八部-武意纵横	Tian Long Ba Bu	√	地下城与勇士	Dungeon & Fighter	Action role-playing game
古剑网络版	Gu Jian Qi Tan Online	√	坦克世界	World of Tanks	Third person shooting

Chart 2. The list published by China Game Industry Annual Conference 2019-2020

According to the order of ranking, select three MMORPGs within two years that meet the requirements of this article, and avatars would be selected from *JX3 Online* (剑侠情缘网络版叁), *Gu Jian Qi Tan Online* (古剑网络版), and *Moonlight Blade Online* (天涯明月刀). It is worth mentioning that Chinese society and social psychology, as the background context of the whole research, will run through the

article, not only closely related to the participation of MMORPG players, but also systematically related to the semiotic interpretation of avatars.

In this study, semiology is concerned with identification of avatars as a three-dimensional symbol can be read or interpreted as a visual text. Every avatar is a relatively independent synthesis of symbol parts and meaning, assembling the emotion and motivation of the player, which is closely related to reality. Practically, a test model of semiology will be designed, to compare the three-dimensional avatars with multiple symbolic standards.

avatar sign		career	weapon	skill	Representative color	appearance	nature
gaming rule		Cognitive rules	body rules	body rules	visual rules	visual rules	cognitive rules
1	Wanhua (JX3 Online)	healer, recluse	brush pen	burst of damage by pen and ink/ single-object heal by acupuncture	light green	dark purple robe, long straight black hair	gentle manner
2	Qixiu (JX3 Online)	dancer, curer	double swords	high maneuverability, fast and flexible damage / heal by dancing	pink	pink dancing dress with sleeves, high hair bun	active manner
3	Changge (JX3 Online)	Luthier, curer	Qin and sword	attack / cure by the sound of strings	cyan	Cyan long dress, fingerstall for playing the Qin, high hat and wide belt	reserved and bookish manner
4	Chunyang (JX3 Online)	Taoist, recluse	sword	attack with sword and aura	blue	blue robe with large sleeves, high ponytail with tuinga	immortals manner
5	Tiance (JX3 Online)	warrior, tank	spear	attack with spear on horse	red	wearing armor with red tasseled spear, riding a war horse	patriotic manner
6	Cangyun (JX3 Online)	warrior, tank	long knife and shield	attack with a long knife, defend with a shield	black	black huge armor, walking on the ice and snow	refiant manner
7	Gibang (JX3 Online)	beggar	wine gourd and stick	close combat and multi-stage strike skills	brown	dressed in beggar costumes with tatoo and blindfold	unrestrained manner
8	Tiangang (Gu Jian Qi Tan Online)	warrior	spear	attack with spear, temper one's will with battle	red	wearing armor with red cloth	valor manner
9	Yifang(Gu Jian Qi Tan Online)	elves, curer	wreath	drive flowers and plants to attack or cure	pink	wearing pink dress and have fox ears	lively manner

avatar sign		career	weapon	skill	Representative color	appearance	nature
gaming rule		Cognitive rules	body rules	body rules	visual rules	visual rules	cognitive rules
10	Longying (Gu Jian Qi Tan Online)	soldier, tank	long knife and scabbard	accumulating power to attack on the knife	purple	wearing purple outfit with hair tied into ponytail	courage manner
12	Tianxiang (Moonlight Blade Online)	dancer, curer	shelter-wood	dance with shelterwood to attack or cure	pink	pink elegant dress, holding flower shelterwood	gentle manner
13	Yihua (Moonlight Blade Online)	piper, curer	flute	disturb the enemy's mind through the sound of the flute	blue	light blue cloth decorated with flowers	gentle manner
14	Shenwei (Moonlight Blade Online)	soldier	spear, bow and arrow	attack by arrow at long distances, and defeat with fierce spear at close quarters.	orange	wearing armor with orange cloth	valor manner
15	Zhenwu (Moonlight Blade Online)	swordsman	sword	use yin and yang to activate the sword to launch attack	green	wearing robe with long hair tied up into crown	immortals manner
16	Gaibang (Moonlight Blade Online)	beggar	wine gourd	good at close combat and multi-stage strike skills by wine gourd	orange	dressed in beggar costumes, holding flagon	chic temperament

Chart 3. 16 avatars with semiotic characters from three selected MMORPGs

3. Avatars and escapism: motivational facet of role-playing

Escapism belongs to the category of humanistic geography, which aims to understand nature, culture and the interaction mechanism among them from the perspective of escapism, and explain the relationship between human beings and the living environment. In the Internet era, the network ecology constitutes a new geographical “time and space”. Under the high pressure of the rapidly developing urban society, people have the escaping emotion of returning to nature – the role of recluse symbolizes the natural turn, staying away from fighting and strife. Chinese scholars point out that the reasons for escapism come from any level that may cause stress. The objects that humans escape from are nature, culture, and chaos (周尚意, 张春梅, 2004), that is, uncertain things and states (许源, 汤玲玲, 张凯, & 李怡萌, 2019). Humans often feel confused and uneasy in the unreached areas of cognition, so they instinctively avoid them. Therefore, all escapism originates from two aspects, namely nature and culture (周尚意, 张春梅, 2004). Firstly, In the Internet age, people have broken through the limitations of space, so the escape from nature can be realized anytime and anywhere, no matter where the physical body is, only need to connect to the world through electronic portable devices. Secondly, because the avatars discussed in this article and the relationship between the avatar and the appearance of escapism, that is born from the Internet space, where can be regarded as a new space-time relationship and geographic form in the Internet age. It provides a special time and space platform for self-exhibition. In other words, people have the opportunity to use the Internet to break time and space and create a virtual self-image. Therefore, this article tries to supplement and summarize the expressions of escapism in the Internet age based on previous researches: escapism originates from three aspects, culture, reality, and self.

3.1. The escapism from culture to nature

Escapism as a survival strategy, provide people are oppressed, they may not be able to grasp the reality full of uncertainty, the first thing that comes to mind is to leave “here”, avoid “it”, and flee elsewhere. The survival crises spawned by modernity

undoubtedly trigger people's instinct to escape. Escape in the spatial sense is the most direct way.

In the process of gradually getting to know oneself, social relations are an important part that cannot be ignored. People grow up to a certain stage and are eager to participate in social life and meet the needs of escape from loneliness through social interaction. The complexity of social relations has brought people the distress of loss. People are fatigued in the process of maintaining and changing social roles. They will also encounter doubts and challenges when individual cultures such as family environment, educational background, growth experience and other cultural characteristics are challenged, producing a desire to escape from social culture to nature - which is also defined culturally. The object of escape is not the entire cultural world, but the part that threatens human existence or hinders human development, to go back to a less constrained world, with natural creatures, weather, natural landscape and laws.

In the Internet age, the limitations of space are lifted, the escape to nature can be realized in both self of the mind and visually, no matter where the physical body is, only need to connect to the world through electronic portable devices. Among the first 4 samples of avatars (Wanhua, Qixiu, Changge, and Chunyang, from *JX3 online*), they have great commonality in the shaping of the symbol of the career and residence – recluse. The role of the recluse indicates that, an access towards natura, though a virtual one, is an alternative way of self-release for the players to escape far from the cultural and social restrictions. As the in-game scenes show below, the valley, accompanied by flowers, cypress, deer and crane, which are also important symbols for the nature essence, warrior who walks all rivers and lakes finally lives in seclusion.

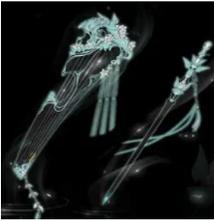
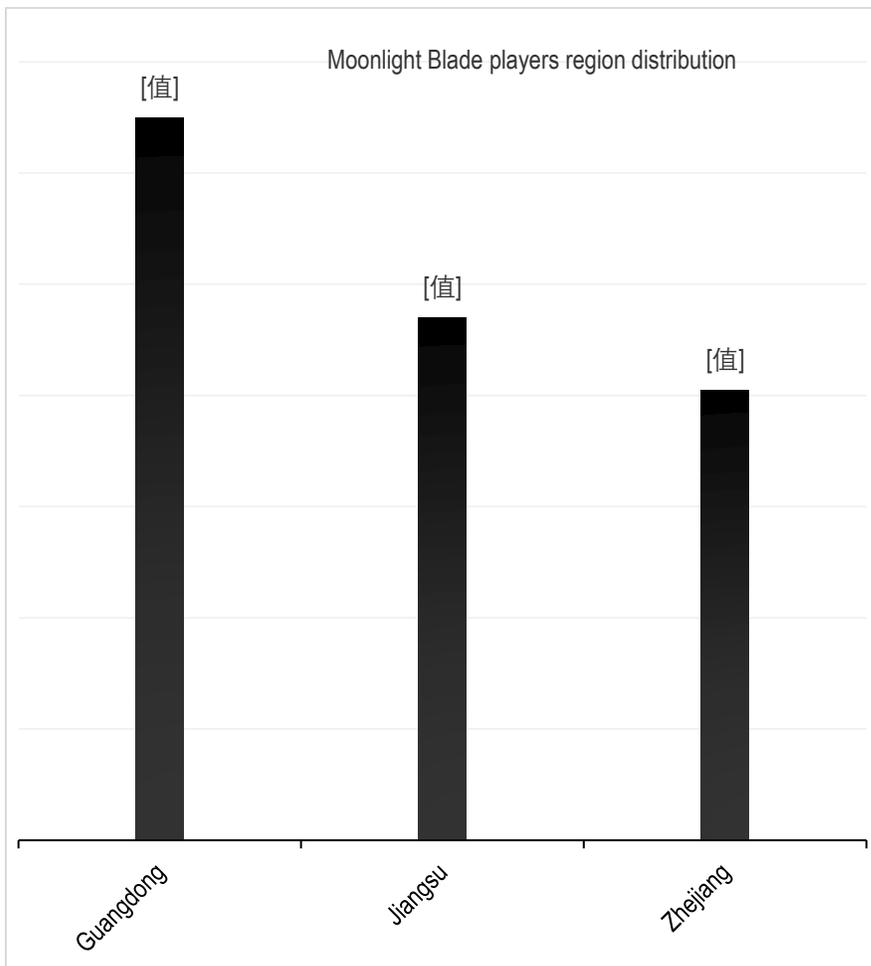
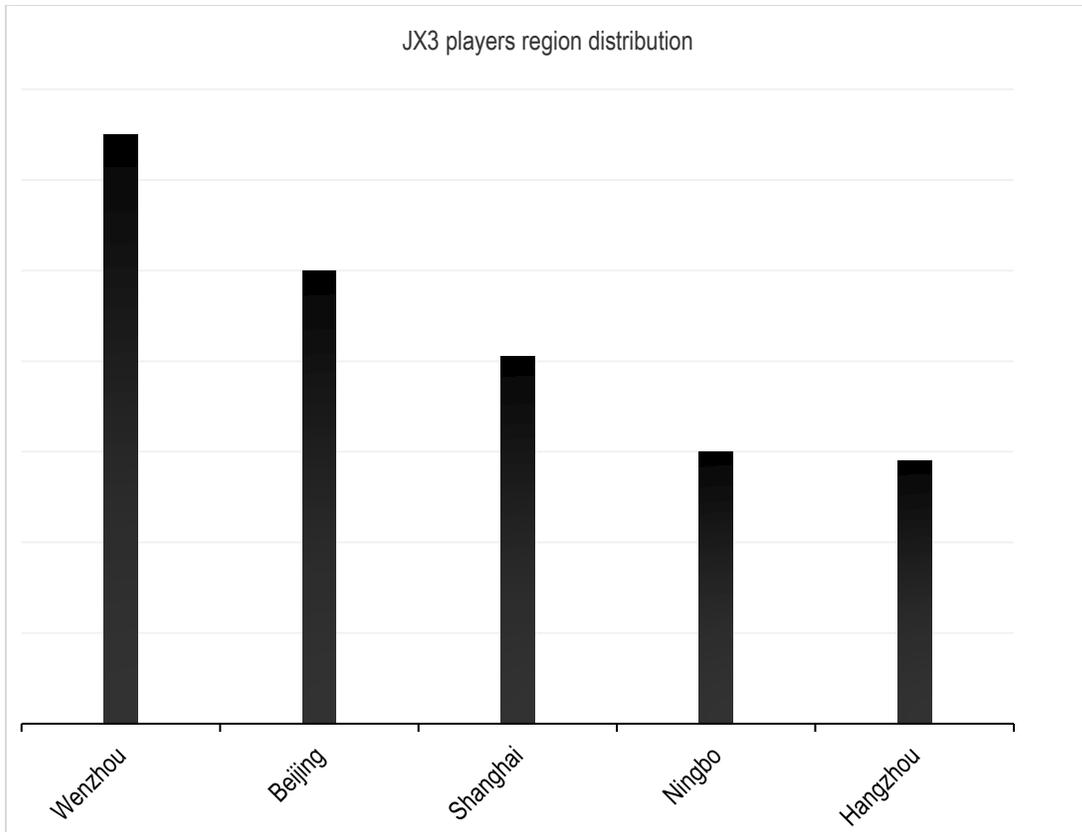
name	natural landscape	natural creature	weapon	audio and sounds	proportion of players (2018)	rank of proportion
Wanhua				Bamboo flute music with chords	14.6%	1
Qixiu				Chinese lute song	12.4%	2
Changge				Guqin music	7.6%	6
Chunyang				Vertical bamboo flute song	10.2%	3
Common	wide-open landscape; lush growth of green	deer, swallow, squirrel; carp; crane	pen; bamboo flute; dancing; Qin; ancient sword	Ancient Chinese musical instruments, melodious, soothing, and open		

Chart 4. The natural symbols of “recluse” avatar in JX3

In the pre-modern era, the city used to be the ideal choice for escapist, because it kept away from the threat of nature and eased the pain caused by the change of the seasons. The extravagant life of today's ultra-modern or post-modern metropolis also cannot ensure the deep demand for human security(左晓斯,& 李钰,2009. People in contemporary society live in a variety of artificial environments and intend to be farther away from the real or the original, increasingly feeling that existent life is unreliable and even suspicious. Then the human instinct of escapism sprouts again, cycling through the process of getting used to the present, escaping from the present, and returning to the present.



Graph 1. *Moonlight Blade* players' region distribution



Graph 2. JX3 players' region distribution

According to the Baidu Statistics, early in 2010, the top five cities for the distribution of JX3 players are: Wenzhou, Beijing, Shanghai, Ningbo, and Hangzhou¹; in 2020, other statistics indicate the proportion of players in each province in *Moonlight Blade*, where Guangdong ranks as the top, accounting for 13% of the total players, followed by Jiangsu and Zhejiang, accounting for 9.4% and 8.1% respectively². It can be seen that most players are concentrated in the eastern and southeast coastal areas of China. During the decade of continuous advancement of China's urbanization, the eastern and southeastern coastal regions of China have been the leaders in economic development, urbanization, and internationalization, and their degree of urbanization is second to none in China. The complexity of social relations brings people the distress of being lost. With the development of Chinese society, the social roles played by individuals are quickly diversified, and the fatigue caused by changing social roles prompts people to escape. "Culture can be produced in the process of evading threats

¹ https://tieba.baidu.com/p/2355780562?red_tag=0195884140

² <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/7241420087?>

and uncertainties, which also determines that it is also full of threats and uncertainties” (许源, 汤玲玲, 张凯, & 李怡萌, 2019). When the rapid intrusion of urbanization promotes the instinct of escapism to sprout again, people are ultimately more inclined to choose “middle-landscapes” in the choice between intellect and instinct (左晓斯, & 李钰, 2009).

The middle-landscapes is located between the two ends of the man-made metropolis and nature, which looks more real, richer in life, and closer to the original appearance of life. In the spectrum of the middle-landscape, the surreal space represented by nature composed of various symbols such as villages, fields, flowers, trees, animals, etc. is divided into two poles, and the virtual game world is undoubtedly an excellent option to escape to the middle-landscape – that is, intellectually human knows that it is impossible to escape or break reality, but instinctively human try to find respite under the pressure of interpersonal socialization and urbanization. MMORPGs, just through the substitution of avatars, using a series of visual and auditory symbols, provide players with an excellent place for “temporary and revertible” escape.

It is worth noting that three of the four avatars, Wanhua, Qixiu, and Chunyang, with the symbol of recluse in *JX3* selected in this article, happen to match the top three avatars that players choose the most published by official *JX3* statistics in 2018. These three avatars were all jointly launched in 2009. Among them, Wanhua players accounted for 14.6% of the total, Qixiu players ranked second, accounting for 12.4%, and Chunyang accounted for 10.2%, accounting for 37.2% of all available avatars. Changge, that also has the recluse symbol, though it was launched in 2015, 6 years later than the other 3 selected avatars, also obtains preference of 7.6% player, occupying a large proportion. As shown in the table, this set of symbols of the selected 4 avatars has a greater degree of commonality and coincident towards the escapism vision. The idyllic cottage, the dancing house, the old-style private school of seclusion, as well as the fairy residence in mountains - these vivid visual symbols, together with the auditory symbols such as melodious bamboo flute and the sound of Qin, woven together into a picture that far from the complex reality of the society, and return to the natural pastoral.

These four avatars use similar symbols to shape the core identity of the recluse, and besides the commonality, they also have their own unique attributes and characteristics. The symbolic construction of this part more concretely and vividly satisfies the imagination of a particular player for the pursuit of escapism towards nature.

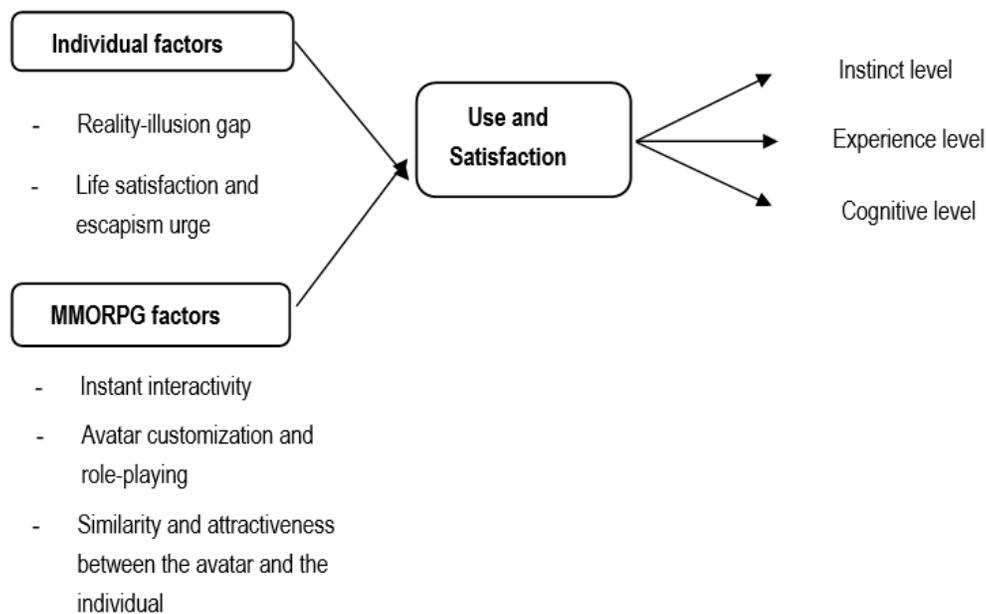
Just as scholars have pointed out, “escapism has become the ultimate strategy to deal with the uncertainty and tension of contemporary life where modernity and postmodernity are intertwined” (左晓斯,&李钰, 2009). Otherness and illusion have become the two magic weapons for the current metropolises to implement this strategy. MMORPGs, with the great power of role-playing essence, post-modern China society with a natural atmosphere and temporary wonders may meet the somewhat helpless and urgent needs of urbanites, especially the young urban citizens.

3.2. The escapism from reality to illusion

The yearning for the illusion world is also one of the three important forms of escapism. Since reality is above human feelings and needs, which is an objective existence that would hardly be influenced though it can be modified by consciousness of human being. The visual in-game avatar symbolizes the higher needs – the illusion, a brief liberation of thought, emotion and self.

This brief liberation can be understood from the sense of self-presence. Self-presence focuses on the mental state of the individual experiencing the virtual avatar as the real self - body schema, emotion and identity in a sensory and non-sensory way, reflecting the closeness of the avatar and the real self (Lee, 2004), and can be seen as an aspect of avatar identity to some extent (Van Looy et al., 2012). Avatars in MMORPGs provide the channel for ordinary players to transform themselves and to be present in another way: the reconstruction of appearance, dressing, makeup, body shape, ability, personal character, and even money and social status. In the summary of the three game motivations of online gamers mentioned above, achievement motivation, social motivation, and immersion motivation (Yee, 2006), are the process of participating in game interaction through a sense of self-presence. On this basis, Chinese scholar gave examples and summarize the participation of three kinds of online gamers (钟智锦, 2010). For example, for achievement players, they are eager to achieve goals in the game world that cannot be realized in real life, to win honor, status and the self-confidence that comes with it. Therefore, they will spend a lot of time fighting monsters and upgrading, as well as money to buy virtual equipment. The fundamental purpose of social players is to enjoy the rich social life in online games, join unions and groups participate and organize battles, communicate their lives and emotions with their game

partners, and the friendship in the game extends to the real world, to experience a sense of honor and belonging. Immersive players play games to forget and escape the troubles and unhappiness in real life. They use games to distract themselves or to get rid of loneliness. They may wish to simply enjoy the fun of the game and experience the plot, understand the picture of the game, immerse themselves in the game and forget other unpleasantness as much as possible. These three types of player experience are not independent and separate from each other, but overlapped and related, that is to say, an individual player may have multiple characteristics at the same time, or may be constantly switching between them. From the perspective of the player's experience, no matter what type of participation is their goal of playing, it is through the use of the real-time interaction, role-playing and other characteristics of the game to construct the "present" self, and to satisfy the escapism urge from the real world and the yearning for the virtual illusion desire.



Scheme 1. Use and satisfaction in MMORPGs

In a narrow sense, the self-presence in gaming experience is inseparable from the presence of visual avatars - the intuitive perception of the appearance of an avatar. That is to say, no matter what game activities players prefer to satisfy their escapist fantasies, the construction of self-virtual presence associates with virtual consumption. Consumption mode is closely related to production mode, and production is not only to provide objects for consumption, but also the level and mode of production determines

the way of consumption. “Production creates objects for consumption, as well as the prescribed nature of consumption, so that consumption can be completed ... Object is not a general object, but a certain object, is must be used in a certain way and is the medium of production itself consumption” (马克思 · 恩格斯 · 1979). Therefore, in terms of the relationship between production and consumption, not only the object of consumption, but also the way of consumption, are created and determined by production. This means that in the gaming space, new production technologies provide people with new cultural consumer products, and at the meantime hide the fundamental changes in consumer behavior behind the application of technology (王林生, 2018). When MMORPG becomes the carrier of cultural production, it also determines the path and mode of cultural consumption. In order to further deepen and realize the fantasy of virtual avatars to achieve the eager of escapism, players will be naturally attracted by the game culture, through consumption means to achieve their desire of illusion, deepen the close connection between oneself and the game avatar in both experience level and cognitive level. From the experience level, aesthetic elements in a game reinforce or amplify other influences such as the technical story of a game (Jeses Schell, 2017). The “aesthetic demand” in Maslow Demand Theory (Maslow A.H., 1943) also holds that “understanding consumption through art becomes more important than understanding art through consumption... In this way, we understand consumer and consumer demand and create the possibilities of a consumer society.” MMORPG to aesthetic personalization, aesthetic diversity, aesthetic popularization to please players and meet the player’s imagination of aesthetics, the desire for the illusioned self-presence, and the dream of escape from the reality.

MMORPG skin sales mode
Skin with no attribute bonus
Skin with attribute bonus (equipment)
Limited sale
Credits
Exchange
Competitive reward

Chart 5. Common MMORPG skin sales mode

For example, limited skins are released only during the Spring Festival, Valentine's Day and other qualified festival in a limited time. The personalized

appearance force in avoiding the game image mediocrity ordinary, player slack situation, and constantly stimulate the player's fantasy of virtual image, create a new consumer hot spot, not to say consumption itself is one of the ways to relieve stress.

In the game, the visual effect of the game avatar, as the most intuitive visual impression of the subject, is the cognitive basis for the interaction between players, Therefore, the visual avatar that is customized through consumption means becomes one of the symbols of the player's honor, identity, and status as the consumption behavior contains its additional social attributes.



Figure 1. The 5th anniversary red hair, exceeds 200,000 RMB so far

For example, the series of appearance released during the fifth and the sixth anniversary in *JX3* were sold in a limited edition, and they are currently out of sale, only sold through player-to-player as unbound in-game objects. These appearances are regarded as synonymous with “celebrity” “rich women”, and “socialite”. The market price of the most expensive appearance has reached to 200,000 yuan so far. Besides the wearing of player, the appearance and quality of a ride is also contributed to the bounded avatar. Because of its rare drop probability and high market price, “Red Hare Horse” is called as “wife” by professional players who attack on horseback, which is an important element of glory, identity and sense of belonging. Another example is the *Justice*. It is precious for the out-of-print points redemption appearance, and there is no purchase channel but only accumulating points through consumption denominations, and then exchange points to obtain appearance. In this way, the visual effect of the

appearance transcends its own aesthetics, and is linked to the level of consumption at the same time, becoming a symbol with both aesthetic and social attributes.

Last year, Jinshan Software announced its second quarter financial results in 2020, Jinshan Software Online Game revenue increased 53% Year-on-year to 869 million yuan, mainly due to *JX3* gained extremely strong earnings growth and the sales of appearance³. On February 25, 2021, as a developer of MMORPG *Justice*, NetEase released its fourth quarter and full-year 2020 results. The income of NetEase for the quarter was 19 billion yuan, up 25.6 per cent year-on-year, and the income from online gaming services was 13.4 billion yuan, up 15.5% YoY, breaking 10 billion yuan for 11 consecutive quarters, achieving steady growth according to the results. NetEase's revenue from online gaming services was 54.6 billion yuan in 2020, and 46.4 billion yuan in 2019⁴. At the meantime, *Justice* has also opened up a new path for the social attributes of appearance, that is, obtaining a limited appearance through in-game competitive activities, hidden gaming booster, cheating, and undercurrents in the business of in-game trading. Due to the particularity of the competition event, the appearance is not only linked to the level of consumption, but also closely linked to the status of the avatar. The labels of “champion” and “talent” are very attractive for players to satisfy their self-presence fantasy.

Through in-game consumption of character customization, as scholars pointed out, is the search for the “real self” of existential authenticity (Ning Wang, 1999). Due to the restrictions, controls and manipulations imposed on people physically and psychologically by various powers in contemporary Chinese society drive people gradually slide into an unreal, alienated state of existence, resulting in a feeling of losing themselves, and alienation. Through the presence of the avatar in the game to realize the self-presence, and then through the consumption to deepen the connection and experience relationship between the self and the avatar, the body and psychology are gradually awakened to be the subject with its own power again, being out of the strict monitoring of reality. At the same time, the interaction among players in the game happens to be distinctive from reality, not constructed by power relations, but a loose and weak “temporary community” of interest-related connections, which is an interactive

³ 金山财报.<http://news.17173.com/content/08192020/112947511.shtml>

⁴ 网易财报.<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1692658064895237692&wfr=spider&for=pc>

exchange that provides an equal and loose environment. Therefore, in such loose, low-power-density air, there is great freedom to shape oneself incarnation, and the experience of adding self-presence through consumption as a direct means is instant feedback, high-yield, and immediate effect.

3.3. The escapism from self to digital self

Escapism brings more philosophical enlightenment to the field of geography, and human-space relationship is the subject of human geography research and is influenced by physical geography and escapism. Researchers are often accustomed to looking at problems and thinking from the perspective of materially “earth” as the leading factor of space. However, the Internet era has expanded the vision of the concept of space, and the orientation of evasion and the human-space relationship that escapism focuses on has a new refuge. On the basis of the instinct level from culture to nature and the experience level from reality to illusion that traditional escapism focuses on, this paper believes that from the cognitive level, escapism in the Internet age presents a shift from self to digital self, which is also reflected in the choice of game avatar.

In modern China society, people get rid of the original security bond and gain rationality and freedom, but competition replaces cooperation, individual struggle replaces social arrangements, while the old spiritual world is broken, and the new spiritual world has not yet formed, pulling people fall into loneliness, helplessness, and insecurity. People are eager to realize their self-worth, but in the Chinese society, the realization of self-worth is in the dilemma of “involution”. Descriptions such as “adrift in Beijing and Shanghai”, “dwelling narrowness”, “paycheck-to-paycheck” have become the norm among the young. Yet there is an outlet, it is full of a large amount of immediate feedback, the temptation to quickly manifest self-worth, and has irrelevant narrative to reality, as well as weak real-life social relationship connection – that is, playing games, and specially by role-playing games, the concept of self is magnified, and the escapism occur from self to digital self in identification and cognition.

On the cognitive level, the avatar of the game is the epitome of the digital self, consistent with the real self. Scholars proposed the concept of media role identification (Cohen, 2001) and believes that identification is a process in which individuals experience the role's identity, goals, and viewpoints through imagination. When

identification occurs, the individual is immersed in the virtual world, imagining that he is the character itself, and experiencing the virtual world through the character, there is an emotional and cognitive connection with the character, the character replaces the individual's true self, and the individual temporarily loses self-awareness (Cohen, 2006). With the deepening of psychology, researchers have proposed the theory of game avatar identity based on the characteristics of video games that are different from traditional media and the theory of identity construction (Klimmt et al., 2009). They believe that avatar identity is a social psychological phenomenon related to the self-perception and identity of media users, and is the result of short-term self-construction of individuals in virtual situations. When the individual manipulates and experiences the game avatar in the game, he imagines himself as an avatar, merges with the avatar, and integrates the avatar characteristics into the self-concept, resulting in a temporary change in self-perception. The process of avatar identification is often controlled by unconsciousness. The current research on the influencing factors of avatar identity mainly focuses on the avatars of video games and individual factors, and most of the existing studies mainly discuss the influence of the avatar image on the identity of similarity and idealization (衡书鹏, 周宗奎, & 孙丽君, 2017), which is consistent with the orientation of escapism, to avoid the original atmosphere and the original self, and attach connection with the aimed one.

From the studies of the 'self' definition by Belk (1988) to the behaviour of construction of one's identity by consumption (Ahuvia, 2005), it could be interpreted by the arguments that the 'self' conceptualizes persons dress themselves with identity subjectively, vertically from past to present, and horizontally compose their features by their reaction in social relations. Living online, as an extension of self, has been discussed with assumption of 'present' society of spectacle (Garcia, S. & Jungles, B. & Marchi, G., 2020) as one way of extension of the self.

More specifically, the online game, with its more conspicuous role-playing configuration, audience are more easily immersed in their context. The digital 'self' begins its shaping process when one clicks the mouse selecting an avatar, or experiencing perception of affiliation of clashes within the gameplay. The

curtain metaphor well explains how one would transfer the self between the self in reality to the digital one:

The transition between realities is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain. As the curtain rises, the spectator is “transported into another world” with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of everyday life. As the curtain falls, the spectator returns to reality. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:25)

Take *JX3* as an example. Each avatar is accompanied by “martial poems” to strengthen its characteristics. The poem of Tiance, “The Long River is sunset over the Eastern Capital, the iron horse guards the generals’ tomb.”⁵ When the “curtain” falls, open natural symbols combined with fierce war symbols, together form this narrative of the cavalry, highlighting the justice and tragic setting of the avatar, to strengthen the cognition of justice, courage, tenacity and patriotism, which is very correlated with Chinese traditional culture. Similarly, Tiangang in *Gujian OL* and Cangyun in *JX3*, also employ symbols such as red-tasseled spear, armour, warfare horse to strengthen the cognitive image, as well as “sacrifice”, “warfare” and “defend” in the narratives of the avatars. Through role-playing, players not only realize the substitution of appearance, characteristics, skills and specialties, but also personality characteristics and inner cognition. Identifying with game avatars means activating and strengthening the self closely related to avatar characteristics concept, but the player’s actual self is not activated or activated to a very low degree (Klimmt et al., 2009; Cohen, 2001). In addition, the individual does not completely forget the actual self in the identification process, only identifies certain aspects of the avatar, and identification is a short process, so avatar identification is selective and volatile. In the process of experiencing the game, the players appreciate the sensory and psychological immersion in the digital context of the game on the basis of cognitive consistency, as well as connecting between the self and digital-self taking avatar as a medium. In this escape experience from the self to the digital self, the player actually completes the cognitive conversion to identify with the virtual self in the game, gain a sense of accomplishment and pleasure to further fill the psychological cognitive gap between the two spaces.

However, in actual games, many avatar images are neither similar to individuals nor ideal images, but avatar identification still occurs. This forms the

⁵ The original text is: 长河落日东都城，铁马戍边将军坟。诛尽宵小天策义，长枪独守大唐魂

second tendency of escapism represented by the game avatar, which is to seek the complementarity between the avatar and self, rather than the consistency mentioned before. If the original self is suppressed for a long time, it will have a tendency to destroy. Individuals who are in a lonely and wandering situation for a long time will have anxiety, and the long-term accumulation of anxiety will lead to destructive tendencies. Destroying tendency reflected in personal psychology can be manifested in two extremes: the elimination of the outside and the elimination of the inside. The elimination of the external is the extreme behavior of the external people and things as the target of destruction, while the elimination of the internal is the negation of the self-destructive impulse. The game narrative provides a reasonable explanation for this, because the meaning symbols and narrative transmission of the avatar given by the narrative can increase the individual's identification with the avatar (Sauer, Drummond, & Nova, 2015).

The villain avatars provided in MMORPGs can just confirm this opinion. The design of the villain's avatar caters to the dark side of the player's psychology and the desire to vent. For example, the borrowed symbol of "stealth", "invisible" and "mysterious" become a rich and dark character in the virtual game narrative.

Although these concepts are different, they all believe that identification is the psychological process of the audience experiencing the emotions and opinions of the character from the perspective of the character in the imagination (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).

Besides the consistency and complementarity between self and digital-self, "the curtain metaphor" also indicate a highly structured order: the digital social space is resilient, both for one to enter, and to exit. Firstly, contributed to technologies and the access of internet, the transformation between self and digital-self would be easily captured by a click. The player can switch the 'self' on one's own initiative, to escape provisionally from the real world with explicit configuration, to the digital gameplay world with an implicit one, and the social context changes alongside with the fallen 'curtain' and switched stage. The loops of transferring the 'self' is clear: to escape from one configuration to another. MMORPGs as media, act as highly resilient space, influencing players in shaping their digital-self. The audio-visually constructed "simulation" world of games provide possibility for player to be virtually present, and make up the physical and

emotional experience, which surpass the social reaction and diverse activities in the real world. The self-extended experience and social behavior in MMORPGs magnify the self-worth and self-identification process.

Ultimately, the audience use the medium with purpose. Based on the psychological or social needs of the audience, a certain medium is used to meet their internal needs. The escapism motive of the game reflects one of the intrinsic needs of game players. In the use and satisfaction of MMORPGs as media, players have great initiative to choose to play any avatar and decide how to play. Therefore, based on differentiated and personalized internal needs, players actively choose an avatar that can meet their needs to participate in the interaction.

4. Online and offline: realism and escapism in Chinese society

Human psychology has the function of self-adjustment and self-adaptation and constantly adapts to the social environment in the process of self-escape and correction. In other words, people employ realism and escapism as two situations to adjust themselves for mental stability. However, potential risks are hidden behind the normal mental adjustment, not only due to the natrality of human, but also the special characteristics of MMORPGs are ealisly exploited by those who have ulterior motives.

4.1. Rebuildable identity: escapism and consumption risk

Among various types of games, MMORPGs are considered the most attractive, and its powerful social interaction features and constantly updated content make it full of challenges. According to the “2018 China Game Industry Report”, 47% of the top 100 games in mobile platforms are MMORPG games. Compared with other types of games, this type of game has relatively strong user loyalty and payment capabilities (Game Analytics, 2018). Due to the wide variety of MMORPG content and various gameplay methods, it takes a relatively long time for players to play games. It is very common for players to play more than 30 hours a week. (Salguero RAT, Moran RMB, 2002; Seay et al. 2004)

As the avatar represents the digital-self of the player, it has become a digital carrier in which players embed their self-identity. Players have become part of the MMORPG culture through in-game interactions such as self-substitution, self-performance, and self-identification. This breaks the fixed identity boundary of the players only as the users or consumers of the game. The players become active audiences and participate in the construction of the avatar symbol. Therefore, the authority of the “author” has collapsed in MMORPGs, for game players are both audience and creator. In the context of role-playing and massive social connection, players are the one who are experiencing the original structural setting, as well as conducting cultural narration as community.

But what cannot be ignored is that even if the power of avatar is strong enough to be a connection to the player’s digital self, at the same time, avatar is fragile,

reproducible, and fleeting. Players can easily realize the process of “rebirth” of their digital-self by creating a new avatar and deleting an old one, making a new look, and reinvesting in the social interaction of the game. Social relations, as the digital-self extension in the game, may change accordingly when the roll and the character changes from the reality to digital game. The social connection becomes loose and flexible, and to some extent, with more uncertain features: to ‘rebirth’ in the game with completely different digital identity, or exit from one specific game-world back to the social intercourse in reality, the gameplay relations would be deconstructed. For many, pleasure itself does not exist without the social validation gained through sharing in digital social networks. The construction of identity through images is more common than through actions (Garcia, S. & Jungles, B. & Marchi, G., 2020). So as in the game, the social relations are bounded by the digital-self extension, by temporary interests and the joy of the playing action, it is spatio-temporal, incompact, and elastic, but cohesive. With those features, online game that runs as a resilient media platform, create digital space-time within its specific configuration for the audience. And the player’s transformation between multiple avatars can actually be regarded as a way of escapism as well: from one illusion to another, and from one digital-self to another. Escapism is the constant cycle of adapting to the status quo - looking forward to escapism - escaping to the ideal environment - adapting to the status quo again. The rebuildable essence of avatar provide this chance to meet the psychological need to escape of players.

However, in this process, the potential problems implied by the rebuildable nature of the avatars cannot be ignored. Players may use the rebuildable characteristics of the avatars to “escape” the legal and moral constraints in real life, conducting illegal and criminal behaviors in the game or even offline, or breaking through the moral bottom line.

Criminals are eyeing this opportunity. According to the “Research Report on Internet Fraud Trends During the New Crown Epidemic” released by 360⁶, during January 24 to March 13, 2020, statistics from the 360 hunting network platform show that a total of 3243 valid reports were received. According to the report, the number of Internet users scammed increased by 47% compared with the 2,200 cases in the same

⁶ 360 安全卫士, 猎网平台. (2020.3.19). 新冠肺炎疫情期间网络诈骗趋势研究报告.

period last year. The total amount of reporters defrauded reached 59.97 million yuan, and the per capita loss was 18,492 yuan. Game-related online frauds were mainly concentrated in game currency transactions, game account transactions, game equipment transactions, game power leveling and other scenarios, which are mainly from in-game chatting and in-game advertisements.

Internet fraud usually refers to fraudulent means of defrauding property from others in various forms in order to achieve a certain purpose, and such online fraud also has the problem of low fraud cost. With the cover of the in-game avatar, after the scammers raise money and commit fraud from other players, they could easily withdraw from the guild, deleted their friends, and never returned to this avatar, using a scam routine similar to "Hit and Run". Ordinary players often have nowhere to redress their grievances after being defrauded. In reality, this kind of alarm is usually difficult to deal with in a timely manner. The scammer himself has no other substantial losses other than losing a game avatar, which is more conducive to the implementation of fraud. Therefore, online game fraud has been repeatedly banned, while scammers are acting recklessly.

At the same time, due to the long-term low threshold characteristics of online games, scammer players "escape" the bottom line of the law. Scammers circulate among multiple game accounts and avatars to carry out serial fraud, and it is often difficult to bring them to justice. Adding to the problem, illegal online fundraising is conducted through the "union" and "gangs" in the game. For this reason, for ordinary game players, it is necessary to constantly increase their vigilance and enhance their self-prevention awareness. However, the players' own defense is not enough to eradicate low-cost in-game fraud.

As for player-player transaction risk, Feng Shixin (冯士新), deputy director of the Publishing Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department (中宣部出版局), stated at the China International Digital Interactive Entertainment Exhibition themed forum (中国国际数码互动娱乐展览会主题论坛) that China is accelerating the construction of a real-name authentication system for online games, and it is initially planned to go

online⁷. Theoretically, the real-name login system of online games can connect the avatar with the player to a certain extent, and carry out a series of measures such as the accountability of illegal activities in the game. But there are still some loopholes in whether it could ensure that the player is the owner of the avatar account every time when logging in, and also how to investigate that the player has stolen identity from others (especially parents or friends) for real-name authentication, etc. A series of problems caused by the renewable nature of avatar still need to be further improved.

In addition to the threat of player-player transactions, there is also risk of player-player sales and purchases. Chinese government began to regulate online game trading activities. Online game transaction activities involve the relationship between enterprises and consumers. The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Commerce issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Management of Online Game Virtual Currency" in June 2009, stipulating that the use of online game virtual currency is limited to the virtual services provided by the issuing company itself, and cannot be used to pay, purchase physical products or exchange for any products and services of other companies, to prevent the possible impact of online game virtual currency on the real financial order; it is forbidden for online game virtual currency transaction service companies from providing services to minors; when terminating services, for the virtual currency that the user has purchased but not used, the online game operating company must return it to the user in legal currency or other methods accepted by the user; it is prohibited to use lottery, betting, random draw and other gambling methods to allocate game props or online game virtual currency⁸. These measures have a great impact on the charging methods of online games, and some companies will affect up to 5% of their revenue (虞祖海, 2010).

4.2. Lost in playing: time flow and addiction prevention

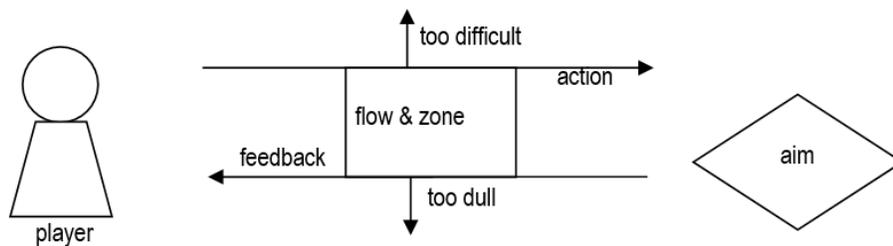
In order to gain a sense of accomplishment through the game, players often spend a lot of time in the game, but usually feel that time passes quickly - Flow theory, which was first proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), explained why people are fully

⁷ 新华 (2020.7.31). 我国网络游戏实名认证系统有望于 9 月前上线.

⁸ 文化部、商务部 (2009.6). 关于加强网络游戏虚拟货币管理工作的通知.

involved in the situation when performing certain daily activities, concentrate their attention, and filter out all irrelevant perceptions to enter a state of immersion. Players in the flow are fully attracted, yet long periods of immersive digital existence also carry the risk of addiction.

Studies have conducted regression analyses based on the social demographic characteristics of players by examining the game motivations of different groups of people, and pointed out that the older the player, the weaker the need they have to pursue success, find interpersonal relationships, and escape from reality to the virtual world (钟智锦, 2010). As people grow older, they become more mature and able to distinguish between the virtual world and the real world, and thus the more calmly they can treat the virtual reality in the game. At the same time, research also pointed out that the strength of achievement motivation has nothing to do with education level, that is to say, regardless of the education level of players, they more or less hope to upgrade and obtain achievements in the game as soon as possible. Thus, to get a sense of accomplishment is a common quality of players, and fits in with human nature. When people are engaged in accomplishment activities, if they are completely concentratedly involved in the situation, and filter out all irrelevant perceptions, they will enter a state of immersion, which is called a “zone”. In order to maintain a person’s sense in the zone, the activities he participates in need to strike a balance between the “difficulty of the activity” and the “ability of the participants”. If the difficulty of the activity exceeds his ability, the participant will be anxious, being suppressed by the activity; conversely, if the difficulty of the activity is lower than his ability, the participant will feel dull. The ability of human to endure makes up a fuzzy area between “difficult” and “dull”, an area that does not produce anxiety nor boredom.



Scheme 2. The mechanism of sense of the “zone” in gaming

Flow theory illustrates that only when a task meets the ability of a player, the state of flow can be produced. The right zone makes players more orderly, more certain, and more identified with the virtual self. Therefore, whether the player can have a sense of immersion and enter the zone successfully is an important criterion for the player to evaluate a game, and it is also an important way of escapism. Immersion for the player experience refers to the experience when a player is fully engaged in a game, and when this experience occurs, the player will no longer pay attention to the time around him and forget all external pressures, successfully achieving a complete escape. Because of the importance of immersion, many studies on the use of immersion theory to evaluate game experience are underway, but only a few researchers spend their time on the topic of how to achieve immersion in games, and there is no fully defined methodology to guide game designers on how to maintain the player's immersive experience. This aspect is still to be further explored by the academic industry in the future. As the relationship between avatar and escapism, flow is an important way to achieve it. Through flow, online game players integrate themselves with avatars, and when they make friends with others or confront others through game play, they will have a yearning for the role of the game and project themselves into this beautiful yearning. A high degree of recognition for game avatars, and therefore a sense of dependence on the characters in online games, and break away from reality and realize flow, and thud devote more and more time and energy to the world of online games.

From the overall situation of the development of MMORPGs in China, the virtual living in online games can be initially understood through the game's billing model, as shown in the following table:

MMORPG billing mode
Order check
Monthly check
Vip membership
One-time permanent purchase
Free timing

Chart 6. Common MMORPG billing mode

An MMORPG usually has two or more billing models at the same time to meet the diverse needs of players. Through different game billing modes, players can usually choose to adapt to and manage their own their own in-game living time to achieve “flow”,

experience the game world, satisfy the desire to escape. This can provide inspiration for online game companies to enhance player loyalty - through the mediating effect of avatar identity, this kind of online game experience would have a direct positive predictive effect on online game addiction (陈星宇, 范丽恒, 2021). Especially after the individual has a positive experience in the game, the level of game involvement will increase (Brockmyer J H et al., 2009), lead to repetitive online gaming activities. According to the rational addiction theory, repetitive activities may have addictive tendencies (Davis R A, 2001), and online game players are gradually indulging in online games when they continue to experience the thrill of online games (陈星宇, 范丽恒, 2021).

Although escapism is an important psychological mechanism of human self-stress regulation, it can develop in a cyclical manner through the process of “familiarity with the status quo”- “escape from the status quo”, thereby venting emotions, alleviating pain, and balancing one’s own psychological world, and at the meantime provide hug benefits to gaming companies, yet at the same time, the risk of escapism caused by the role of online games is also worthy of vigilance.

According to the “Research Report on the Internet Usage of Minors in China in 2019” (《2019年全国未成年人互联网使用情况研究报告》) jointly issued by the Ministry of Youth Rights Protection of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (共青团中央维护青少年权益部) and the China Internet Network Information Center (中国互联网络信息中心), through the study of Chinese youth in 31 provinces (autonomous regions, municipalities), elementary schools, junior high schools, A sample survey of 34,661 students from high schools and vocational schools can infer that the size of China’s minor netizens is 175 million. In the sample survey, 61.0% of minors often engage in online activities as games⁹. According to the “Research Report on the Cognition, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Online Games among Primary and Secondary School Students” (《中小学生网络游戏的认知、态度、行为研究报告》) released by the

⁹ 中国互联网络信息中心 . 2019 年全国未成年人互联网使用情况研究报告[EB/OL]. 2020-05-13. http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/qsnbg/202005/t20200513_71011.htm.

China Youth Research Center (中国青少年研究中心) in 2019, a survey of 3,202 students from the fourth grade to the third grade of high school in 6 cities found that 76.3% of the students in elementary school started to be exposed to online games, and 51.5% of students said they like to play online games¹⁰. It can be seen that online games have become a relatively common and popular form of entertainment among teenagers.

Under the important principle of putting social benefits first, strengthening the protection of minors is the social responsibility and basic obligation that the whole Chinese society must fulfill. This is achieved by using the "anti-addiction" system of online games. The "anti-addiction" system is implemented by the General Administration of Press and Publication (新闻出版总署) and other departments. It aims to control the online time of minors in online games and prevent minors from indulging in online games and harming their physical and mental health and social development. The system was officially implemented in July 2007. The main content is: online game players must register under their real names and minors are included in the anti-addiction system. Although this policy had imperfect measures and some players used loopholes to circumvent it, it still had impact on the on-time charging business model, especially the on-time charging business model online games where most of the minor players are played (虞祖海, 2010). Last year, in accordance with the legal requirements of the "Internet Protection" chapter of the new version of the Law on the Protection of Minors (《未成年人保护法》“网络保护”专章), and in accordance with the work requirements of the competent authority to regulate online game services and protect minors' physical and mental group standards such as Game Age Reminder (《网络游戏适龄提示》) have been completed, and anti-addiction work has been generally implemented¹¹. For example, improve the real-name authentication system upgrade of online game accounts, strictly manage the duration of online games for minors, focus on supervising minors' paid game services, and strengthen industry supervision and age-appropriate prompt systems. Anti-addiction work has become a social responsibility obligation that integrates industry management, parent guidance, and school supervision.

¹⁰ 中国青年报.(2019.3.7).中小学生网游调查:什么样的孩子不会沉迷网游.

¹¹ 中国音数协游戏工委(GPC).(2020.12.11).2020年中国游戏产业报告.

4.3. Cultivating an avatar: Immaterial labor and escapism

In Marx's era, machines gradually replaced manpower, and handicraft workshops developed into large-scale industrial production. The process of consuming the means of production is also a process of simultaneous consumption. In modern times, virtual games created by the combination of computer and network technologies are no longer pure entertainment tools, but gradually become profitable commodities, and even a 24-hour “working platform” that is “not closed”. MMOs are a “co-creation” of player communities and corporate developers. (Taylor, 2006a, 155), as well as avatars they co-created. Playing MMORPG games by avatars requires combined communicational, technical and affective creativity, and long-term effect, which offers a telling site for its critical exploration: in the time when players are busy with reality and virtual offline, they still tend to cultivate their avatar for a long time, so that their equipment, appearance, attributes and other aspects can catch up with the level of in-game season. Whenever players return to the game again they can satisfy their desire to escape to the greatest extent: no matter how long they are away from keyboard, they can still immediately have the strongest weapon, the most noble appearance, and satisfy their inner sense of accomplishment and escape demand. Hence, in-game immaterial labor rises in response to the condition.

Immaterial labor is “work that creates immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt & Negri, 2004), which is less about the production of things and more about the production of subjectivity, or about the way the production of subjectivity and things are in contemporary capitalism deeply intertwined (Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G., 2009: 4), and the rebuildable virtual identity and the loose social relations make up the willingness of a player to take immaterial labor. The altered composition of digital play is especially clear in regard to age: people who grew up with games persist with them as adults, so that the average gamer’s age now hovers around thirty. (Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G., 2009: Introduction xvii) According to age statistics of Chinese online game players in 2019, most audience are around their 18-25, which occupy 28%, and 24.3% players in their 26-36 rank as the second. Provided with reproducible virtual profit and changeable identity, young players can trade digital labor in the games for beneficial aims alongside with social purpose (Gamelook, 2019). Barter, reselling, auction, and

group buying, purchasing behaviors are ubiquitous, as well as services, such as game leveling, game accompanying, and game character adopting. By changing the skins of their characters, altering their weapons, or enrolling in the game profitable activities for gaming props, immaterial labor are achieved.

Online game leveling is neither unique to China nor originated in China, but the Chinese game leveling industry "in a unique socio-political context of the game industry and the interaction between players"(胡冯彬, 2020), relying on "player-centric businesses and services to fill the gap between game production and consumption, a gray area has emerged that blurs the boundaries between consumption and production, as well as legality and illegality" (Zhang & Fung, 2014: 39). In recent years, the development of the online game industry, the country's strong support for the game industry, and the low cost of human labor, etc., have all contributed to the formation of a large-scale, global-oriented power leveling industry chain in a short time. The center of online game leveling. It is worth noting that as a new type of digital labor, online game leveling not only continues to blur the boundaries of production and consumption, work and entertainment, but also eliminates the forced nature of labor. Online game power levelers actively participate in production labor in a "voluntary and pleasant" way.

The academic circle refers to digital labor such as online game power leveling as "playbour", which dissolves the difference between work and games that temporarily appeared in space, and gave birth to "value-creating entertainment interaction, productive consumer behavior, and labor-bearing games" (Fuchs, 2014: 270). Online game playbour, a form of digital labor, has completely broken

The boundaries between "work" and "entertainment", "production" and "consumption", "service delivery" and "service use" also transform the forced labor of workers into a voluntary and pleasant state.

In addition to casual players and playbour, there are also many people who occupy themselves in the game. Their primary purpose is not to entertain but to obtain financial rewards, or even to pursue career success. There is a very clear boundary between them and the "productive play", "prosumer" and "player": they are soberly aware that they are exchanging labor for remuneration, and games are their work

"place", just like Farms, factories or office buildings; games are also their production tools, like hoes, lathes or typewriters.

Including the labor of e-sports players, game anchors, gold coin farmers and leveling companions, etc., they tend to be marginalized, temporary, and "unstable",

But this kind of special labor of game nature can actually be regarded as a microcosm of the escapism of Chinese young gamers: the shift from conventional labor to labor of game nature. This is not to say that escapism is negative, but provide a hint for the opportunities in Chinese gaming industry - self-consistent market economy system, operating rules, and cultural habits together constitute a new field. The development of the game industry is also the epitome of the digital economy and creative economy in the new era in China. Old jobs are dying out, new jobs are being created, and people of different education levels have the opportunity to find work that can be done and earn a basic income, more importantly, with voluntary escapism desire of the old rules and the willing of pursuing pleasure.

With the development of Chinese society, the boundary between "work" and "game" in the traditional sense has gradually melted, and the "field" formed by the game industry is providing a new alternative destination for escapism. Escaping itself is a cyclical process. Adapting to the status quo - seeking to escape - adapting to the status quo again, so as to achieve inner balance. Then the game as a medium and as a new "field", not only provides a short-term relief for ordinary players to get a breathing space, and also open up a path of escape and adaptation among the people who are looking for creating economic and social value. Even if the legitimacy of playbour is still in an unclear grey area in China, this choice still provides some people in Chinese society with a choice that suits their work abilities, inner desires, and lifestyle.

Conclusion: Online and offline social support

“Gamification” is an irreversible wave of this era, and China is about to usher in an unprecedented “gamification” future. Games are not only a carnival that a group of people indulge in, but also a platform and media for us to express ourselves and create meaning. The stereotypes of “games” in China need to be broken, and we must re-treat “playing”, as well as “escaping”, with a cautious attitude. The purpose is to discover the positive meaning of escapism, which maintains the control of moving forward and upward in a cycle. The positive meaning of escapism is that, it takes awareness of the environment as its premise, which ultimately points to the exploration of new worlds and the development of lifestyles.

The motivations of MMORPG games are complex. Playing online games is to meet certain psychological needs, and it is the differentiated game motivation that determines the different game behaviors of players: playing is not for a single purpose, but a complex psychological, inextricably linked, and constantly transforming motivation. Among these, escapism is one of the motivations of games to drive players to participate in online games, which is in line with the theory of use and satisfaction. Through avatars as symbols, escape behavior appears in two levels: real space and image space, and regards people as the center and discusses the tripartite relationship including people's attributes, behaviors, and environment. The relationship between escapism and avatars represented by the virtual network environment creates another escape destination for human beings. On the one hand, games are dangerous: people unknowingly invest a lot of time and money in the entertainment process, which is a consumption driven by more advanced illusions and unconsciousness; on the other hand, it is also a flexible and diverse cultural carrier. As the industry matures and its influence expands, it becomes a new type of business where youth and vitality burst out and tradition and innovation continue to blend at all times.

Therefore, escaping to the game world is not passive, but even active. Players can not only choose the game they want to immerse themselves in, but also participate in the reproduction of game content during the playing behavior, as “active audience”. This is also particularly prominent in MMORPGs. The symbols of role-playing avatar settings make convenience for new players to find a suitable “frame” for self-substitution;

on the other hand, and players as “active audience”, under the influence of acculturation, new understandings of the role could be established - gradually changed from a receiver to an initiator in the process of acculturation, and actively accommodating themselves through social channels such as in-game platform. The Chinese game fan culture is rising prosperously and the game industry promotes the IP development. For example, the players of Chinese MMORPG *JX3*, with rich fun-fiction culture, spontaneously employ Baidu PostBar, Weibo, and game-derived app in creating intimate public space for their game-rebuilt identity. Guo Weiwei, the producer of *JX3*, pointed out that in 2020, the 11th anniversary of *JX3*, the game received an increase of 35%, and the classic swordsman series that they have operated for more than 15 years increased by 16% on average. These growths are not only financial, but also from the increase in the number of our users. The users of *JX3* even increased by more than 20% compared with last year on independent IP¹². Here, MMORPG players “are not trying to dominate, but trying to spread, to achieve the effect of reception and response... Active acceptance and vivid response in turn depend on an effective experience community.”

The shortcomings of this research are non-random samples. Due to the dispersion and anonymity of players, it is difficult to develop a sampling frame for random sampling. Future research will try to select more representative samples for testing.

¹² https://www.sohu.com/a/448291522_162522

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