

# Idol Ideal

You're in the audience, amongst ten thousand screaming fans, waiting for the star, the singer, the idol to appear on stage. And she does—not by walking on, but by simply appearing, one moment nothing, the next, in the spotlight. The music begins, other figures appear on stage as background dancers, and then the idol begins to sing.

And for all intents, she is real. And yet ... she isn't. Or, at least, she isn't any more than pixels are real. But she looks, moves, acts ... very real indeed.

While this scenario is about a step removed from today's technology (the holographics for a live performance aren't up to speed yet), as far as watching a performance on TV, or in the theatres, is concerned, we have reached the moment when the virtual is nearly indistinguishable from the real; yes, the moment that

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William Gibson foretold in *Idoru*, and that Hollywood has used to frighten its children and itself for years, has arrived.

For anyone in Japan, this is nearly a statement of the obvious: Virtual idols have been an experiment in progress since the mid-1990s, with the likes of Hori-Pro's Kyoko Date gracing the covers of magazines and putting out CDs. Those first attempts have long been consigned to the attics of the JF Sebastians of the world, but they weren't the last. Since then several straight-on attempts at VIs, various video game characters, and a feature film have created a movement, and in some cases a viable market, in favor of virtual idols.

The most visible of these in the West was Square Pictures' big-budget feature film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. A continuance in some ways of Square's (now Square Enix) highly acclaimed *Final Fantasy* series of video games, FF:TSW was a bold step in CG work, with an entire cast of virtual characters who looked about 95% real—in fact, there were moments when the audience might completely forget that what they were looking at was animation, from the characters to the backgrounds. This was an incredible technical achievement, and while the film itself was not the absolute best in terms of plot and pandered a bit much to Hollywood-style cinema, it should have garnered more praise than it did. As it was, the West wasn't ready to see its actors replaced, and the film did remarkably badly in terms of box office receipts. It was snubbed again at the Acade-

my Awards ceremonies, where Hollywood stuck its head in the sand, ostrich-like, and pretended that the film didn't exist—FF:TSW won not a single award, despite being the most technologically progressive film ever seen.

While this helped put Square's feature film-making division out of business, Square Enix continues to this day to create the most stunning and graphically incredible game cinematics ever seen (not to mention another short film, *The Final Flight of the Osiris*, which has nearly the animation quality of FF:TSW). Its latest addition, *Final Fantasy X-2*, includes a music video-type sequence that drops the jaw: The opening of this article is, in fact, a poor textual recreation of part of the sequence (and the image used is from that game: Yuna, singing on stage). The movements of the lead character, Yuna, are nearly "more human than human," as *Blade Runner* might have had it, and other than being far too smooth-skinned to be a real woman, Yuna could pass for any of the popular "real" idols gracing the pages of *Rolling Stone* and other magazines. If Square Enix had a mind to, they could probably port characters like Yuna out of the games and give them lives of their own in the "real" world.

In the case of e frontier/Blue Moon Studio, Inc., a Japanese company that has several "digital beauties" it uses as models and musicians, it has done just this: taken a 3D model and given her a life of her own. One of the models, Fei Fei, has, in the past, done advertising for Samsung, appearing in ads on the sides of buses, on billboards, and even in a

television commercial. She even has an entire photobook, *A Fragment: Fei Fei Photographs*, and some of the images there are astonishing: In one, she appears with what we presume are real children, and there is no way to tell that she is in any way virtual.

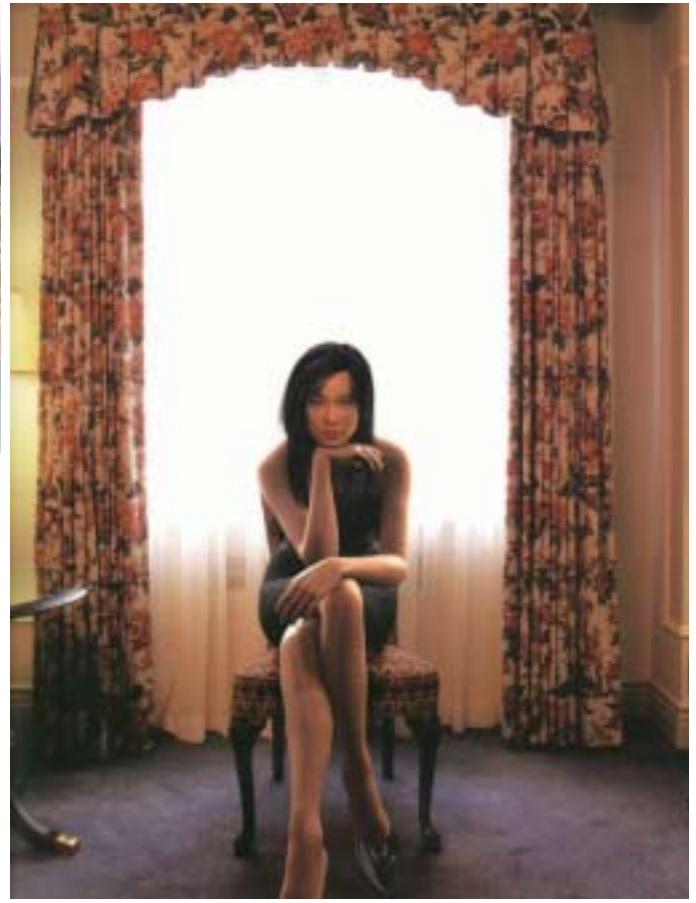
Another Japanese group, Ken-ichi Kutsugi / extage, owns the copyright to another virtual idol, Yuki Terai. Although less stunningly realistic than either Fei-Fei or Yuna, Yuki Terai has everything an idol could want: photo books, a music CD, DVDs, calendars, posters, greeting cards, PlayStation games, and even her own internet browser. In addition, she has further developed a more "human" side to her: According to an article on Akadot, "Even though everyone is clear Yuki is not real, she is still worshipped and cared for due to her imperfections and frailness." She is pictured not only in the types of settings that are standard idol fare (singing, on CD and magazine covers, etc), she is also pictured eating frozen dinners alone, as a painter annoyed with her dog, and even holding a gun to her head.

### **How to Be a Successful Virtual Idol, Part One**

What Yuki Terai has given virtual idols that others will have to have to survive is a human, emotional element, something beyond looking good and moving well. In the same way that an actual robot/repllicant/what-have-you will have to be able to interact with human beings on an emotional level in order to make people care about them, virtual idols must inspire caring feelings in their human audience. How does a

company do this? Really, it is about character development.

As in any good book, or film, the way to make the audience spend its money and read/watch breathlessly is through well-developed characters: Indiana Jones and James Bond are fondly remembered, developed emotionally and humanly, and the characters alone are enough to draw an audience. In the same way, a virtual idol can become beloved not by being an overlogical Mr. Spock-type character but by being a Roy Batty, an emotional emblem of a troubled human being, or at least a being searching for answers within themselves, at least appearing to think about their reactions to the world around them as if they were human. Yuki Terai has achieved this through emotional and heart-tugging photos and quotes; Square Enix achieved this in FF VIII with its expert characterization of Squall Leonheart and Rinoa



fei fei  
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## FF VIII, the Emotion Engine, and character development

Square's (now Square Enix) Final Fantasy VIII was a turning point in video game history, especially as concerned the non-video game playing public: Its use of realistically rendered characters in incredible cinematic (or full-motion video, or FMV) clips had gamers and non-gamers alike interested in the love story of Rinoa and Squall, far beyond the gameplay itself. Getting to the FMV clips became almost the reason for playing the game.

And what's wrong with that?

The characters in FF VIII are very well developed, and the cinematics, plot and soundtrack tie into this to create some of the most memorable characters ever seen, whether in game or film. The scene depicted to the left of this article became an emblem of the game's emotional impact and, indeed, is used as both part of the introductory FMV and later in the game.

Part of the success of these characters is Square Enix's use of the "Emotion Engine," an element of Sony's PlayStation that allows for finely rendered cinematics. In FF VIII, the Emotion Engine is used to render the characters' facial expressions in detail, giving them just the extra "human" element that made them stars beyond the gamer's purview. This, in addition to the fine character arcs and plotting Square Enix consistently brings to its Final Fantasy series (see especially Final Fantasy VII and the famous death of Aeris), make Rinoa and Squall, and the characters that follow, prime candidates for virtual idolhood.

Heartily, summed up in one of the most stirring cinematic sequences in video game history (see sidebar). (Whether Yuna and her companions in FF X-2 accomplish this has yet to be seen in the US, as the game will not be released here until early December.)

Of course, the look and movement of a character help convey emotions and become a deeper character. Square Enix achieved this in FF VIII using the PlayStation's much-touted "Emotion Engine," which allowed them to render facial expressions with much finer detail in the cinematic portions of the game.

### How to Be a Successful Virtual Idol, Part Two

Of course, the second important element of virtual idol creation is marketing, with a big capital M. Without this, the idol isn't noticed, just as a human idol will fall between the cracks without being shown on billboards, buses, and television. More to the point, the idol must be marketed as an idol to really become one: That is, she (or he; there are a few male virtual idols around) must be seen as a person with varying interests, and not just as a 3D model or video game character (see sidebar on Reiko Nagase from Ridge Racer).

Thus far, it seems that companies either start out to create a virtual idol or don't, and the line hasn't been crossed later in the development of the character. Again, there is no reason why a video game character, for instance, couldn't become bigger than the game; few companies, however, would be willing to risk the marketing money to enter, in effect, an



entirely different field. Square tried such an adventure by filming FF: TSW; one wonders whether anyone will be trying anything like that again soon. However, with singers like Yuna already gracing the screens of gamers across the world, perhaps it is merely a fraction of a step before we see just this.

### The Advantages of Being a Virtual Idol

There are advantages to having (and being) virtual idols around. For one, they fill a niche that human idols cannot: A virtual idol can be anywhere and everywhere at once, can be anything from your companion as you make

yuki terai  
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## Ridge Racer and Reiko Nagase

In contrast to the characters from *Final Fantasy VIII*, Namco's Reiko Nagase, the face that launched a thousand virtual grand prix, never quite made it into the hearts (or even the notice) of non-gamers. Reiko is beautifully rendered, is featured in her own calendar, and even has something of a story behind her ... so why didn't she become a bigger item?

For one thing, Reiko never had the marketing that some game characters and all moderately successful virtual idols have had. She has remained tied in to *Ridge Racer* and is not thought of outside of that venue. While Squall and Rinoa of *FF VIII* sometimes take on a life of their own, being mentioned almost before the game, Reiko is subsumed by *Ridge Racer*, to be replaced by another whenever the company wishes without great fanfare (or even notice outside the game community).

For another, while having a strictly game-related story, Reiko's story and character development have never been as deep as that necessary to create a virtual idol. In fact, in terms of character arc, well, she has none—and the game isn't, after all, about her, so it isn't necessary to the enjoyment of the game.

And, while we think Reiko would otherwise be an excellent candidate for a virtual idol, she just never made it onto that broader stage.

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it through your day to a star singing to millions as they drive home from work. Other stars, that is, real idols, can do this by proxy, but for VIs, it is part and parcel of their existence.

Also, a VI doesn't have to pander to the same sorts of tastes as a real idol, say a singer who has to drag themselves from concert to concert, has to resist the temptations of fame and fortune. A VI can remain innocent, or can follow any trajectory she (or her company, or her audience) likes, breaking ground that real stars can only dream about.

Finally, virtual idols can change at a whim, electronically, no special surgery necessary, no dressing room necessary—as Yuna does in concert, her clothes change completely, both color and substance, before our eyes. They are creatures of the electronic frontier, and while not flesh and blood, they have the advantages of being an integral part of the special effects, and can perform in ways no human can.

### VIs and Humans

Of course, once virtual idols become less-than-rare, the issue of human-VI interaction

will surely come up, as it does in William Gibson's *Idoru*. In *Idoru*, human singer Rez falls in love with VI Rei Toei and plans to marry her; only the fact of his incredible wealth and well-known eccentricity keeps the plans moving forward, and a part of the plot concerns his fan club and whether they will allow such a thing to happen. The VI is seen with the other characters, given a special projection apparatus so that she may appear and interact with people at, for instance, a dinner party, and she is for all intents a member of society—however, she is also the property of the company that developed her, and thus is

also a piece of intellectual and physical property.

One does not need much imagination to see the sorts of issues we raise by creating virtual idols; they are roughly the same as those presented by creating any form of AI. The differences are important, however. For one, current VIs really do not have an independent intelligence; if they sing, it is with another's voice, and with another's ideas. They can appear in almost any medium, but do not go about on their own, driving through the city or taking their dog for a walk in between modeling sessions. As such, they are not going to be afforded the rights of human beings and are, technically and correctly at this time, the intellectual and physical property of the companies that created them.

As emotional as they can be, as perfectly rendered and heart rending as they can be made to seem, they are still, at this time, merely beautiful puppets. But we can imagine them not to be, and perhaps that is the most important element of all.

## Hollywood and Virtual Idols

Hollywood has been afraid of the possibility of "virtual actors" (also called "synthespians") since long before Square Pictures' *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, and with the advent of such films and the ubiquity of computerized special effects (including animals, monsters, and other completely virtual characters) it looks like they may be doing more than just crying "Wolf!" However, given the studios' and actors' monopoly on media coverage and marketing generally, any synthespian-driven film is going to be almost invisible to the movie-going public.

Examples of this multimedia stranglehold abound (the handling of *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* before it won an Academy Award being glaring instances of this), but FF: TSW is the prime example of Hollywood's nightmares made true, and then squashed like a bug in vitriolic overreaction. The US release of FF: TSW did have a moderate amount of fanfare, especially in science and technical magazines which touted the technology and the realism of the characters, but bombed after release (in part because US audiences seem to be perpetually unready to accept an animated film as adult-level fare). One would have thought Hollywood would have been relieved, but at least give the film its due as one of the great technical achievements of its time—but no. FF: TSW was invisible at the Academy Awards ceremonies, not even given a look in at the newly-formed animation award (which went to *Shrek*) and failing to garner even one technical award. Hollywood seemed to be following an "if we ignore it, it will go away" mentality.

Unfortunately, this will work as long as VIs are so expensive to create and maintain (FF: TSW was monstrously expensive): No company is going to spend the money necessary to create a good product in the face of such hostility. However, in other countries, most notably Japan, such experiments may work, and already we are seeing video of virtual idols such as Fei Fei and Yuki Terai—which, while not on a par with FF: TSW, are indicators that the price of the technology is coming down, and when it reaches a suitable level, VIs will again be seen in films. [NOTE: As we were going to press, Square Enix announced at the Tokyo Game Show a summer 2004 release of a 60-minute film using CG versions of the characters in *Final Fantasy VII*. As far as we know, this will be a DVD-only release. Whether it will be shown outside of Japan is unknown at this time.]

One note about the recent Hollywood film about "synthespians," *Simone*. Besides being a not-so-good film in general, it is definitely Hollywood's way of laughing about the possibility of virtual actors—and is almost a piece of disinformation, for the way to create and maintain one in reality resembles very little the images in the film. Add to this that the synthespian in *Simone* is not even computer-generated (she's just a real actor pretending to be virtual) and that the film is ultimately a comedy, and you have a film laughing nervously about the very idea that it puts forward—that VIs would be possible.