

Analysis of the virtual K-pop girl group K/DA in the context of interactive digital performance paradigms

*Dance is about the being in the world. Disembodied dance is about becoming in the world.
The Body Without Organs. - Marcos Novak¹*

Introduction

The artistic product of this analysis is the virtual K-pop girl group K/DA, with special emphasis on the group's AR live performances and K-pop music as a pioneering form of collaborative performance art.

K/DA consists of 4 permanent virtual characters, derived from existing in-game characters of the popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game League of Legends published by eSport giant Riot Games in 2009.² K/DA, as a virtual K-pop group, debuted at the League of Legends World Championship Opening Ceremony on November 3rd 2018 with their AR live performance³ of the song "Pop/Stars"⁴ featuring real-life performers Madison Beer, Jaira Burns and K-pop group (G)I-dle members Miyeon and Soyeon. The live event was held in the Munsu Sports Complex in Incheon, South Korea, while being live-streamed to the homes of many viewers all over the world through the company's website and YouTube.⁵ Following the unveiling of the virtual performers, Riot Games have since released more music videos, live performances and transmedia content of K/DA, including comics and interviews with the virtual band members.⁶

Even though the virtual girl group K/DA and its songs function as experiences to increase the popularity and sales of the related in-game content and merchandise of Riot Games, it can still be analyzed in the context of artistic performances. The notions behind the mainly commercially motivated performances of K/DA are highly relevant to the paradigms of performance studies, performing arts and spectatorship studies regarding body, space and time, especially in the controversially discussed philosophies of technology.

K/DA as virtual K-pop idols

Although virtual performers are not a new phenomenon, the recent advances in holographic projection, that help the technological actualization of their virtual bodies, lead to a surge in the emergence of virtual performers. The virtual girl group K/DA has 4 permanent members - Ahri, Akali, Evelynn and Kai'Sa - who are all female humanoid characters with different personalities and fantastical worldbuilding background narratives.

¹ Novak, Marcos. Liquid Architectures And The Loss of Inscription.

² <https://na.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/event/kda-official-fan-club/>

³ Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Finals | 2018 World Championship, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYSJloehGq0&t=150s>

⁴ K/DA - POP/STARS (ft. Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Jaira Burns) | Music Video - League of Legends, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOxkGD8qRB4>

⁵ <https://www.theverge.com/2018/11/5/18064106/league-of-legends-opening-ceremony-performance-kda-pop-stars-ar-music-video>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/c/leagueoflegends/videos>

To better understand K/DA as virtual K-pop performers, it is important to review the characteristics of K-pop as a contemporarily relevant performance art form. In terms of global, cultural and economic significance, K-pop can be seen as mainstream music from South Korea. Other than the term K-pop suggests, it does not specify one musical genre per se. Despite the vast variety of genres within K-pop, there are certain consistencies within the characteristics of it: digitally synthesized sounds, catchy melodies and synchronized dance routines performed by flawless faces and figures of the group members. Another important feature of K-pop is its fandom culture, in which fans reenact their favorite artists' performances in real life or across mainstream social network services.⁷

Despite its commercial success and mainstream popularity in the entertainment industry in recent years, K-pop productions fulfil many aspects of traditional artistic production definitions as summarized by Malița.⁸ The songs and choreographed dances of K-pop artists display the quality of evoking aesthetic emotional reactions and the feeling of beauty in the spectators' eyes. The songs are mostly original in their nature and don't have any utilitarian purposes. K-pop artists go through extensive training in disciplines like dancing and singing, perfecting every move, which can be compared to the craftsmanship qualities of artists in traditional art definitions.

While the group members, typically called idols, are the face and body of K-pop groups, K-pop productions can be seen as collaborative productions. Behind the performing members of K-pop groups stand teams of choreographers, songwriters, producers and marketers, all working towards the final performance products. The almost manufactured development process of K-pop idols makes virtual performers, like K/DA, as the embodiment of such, inevitable.

The live performances of K/DA

With K/DA being virtual performers, the juxtaposition between the different meanings of *the performer* becomes clearest when analyzing the AR live performances of the virtual girl group. As this paper analyses an artistic product, I will refrain from concepts of performance from other disciplines of study and only refer to "performance as a way to bring the concepts and ideas to life that underlie art".⁹

Riot Games released the music video to K/DA's debut song "Pop/Stars" naming the artists as following: "K/DA - POP/STARS (ft. Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Jaira Burns)". In this title we can already observe the clear distinction between the virtual performers K/DA and the real-life performers Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, and Jaira Burns. The original music video only includes visual representations of the virtual characters, rendering Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Jaira Burns as merely vocal performers of interpretative nature. The dance choreography is shared through an official "Behind the Scenes" video, which displays anonymous dancers that are all dressed in black.¹⁰ This distinction resurfaces with the comparison of the AR live performance of the song "Pop/Stars" at the 2018 League of Legends World Championship Opening Ceremony to the AR live

⁷ Fuhr, Michael. 2016. *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

⁸ Malița, L. (2010). *Extremele Artei*. Editura Accent.

⁹ Mocan, Rodica. 2017. *Paradigme CriticeÎn Performance-ul Digital Interactiv*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

¹⁰ K/DA - POP/STARS Dance - Behind the Scenes | League of Legends.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaAkzLSg0s>

performance of the same song at the 2020 Opening Ceremony.¹¹ In the 2018 performance both virtual performers and real-life performers named in the song release, appear on the same stage, but in the 2020 the song was performed in Chinese language by Chinese singer Lexie Liu, as the ceremony took place in Shanghai, China. Under the official choreography video of K/DA's song "More", a comment, liked by more than 800 users, reflects this phenomenon: "The girl that did [performed] Akali REALLY matched her badass energy", naming the virtual character Akali, while the actual dancer in the video remains anonymous. This showcases the replaceable role of real-life performers in connection with virtual performers. Musically, this is also facilitated through the code-mixing characteristics of K-pop lyrics¹² which switches between different languages. K/DA songs use a combination of English, Korean and Chinese languages.

When discussing AR live performances, the notions of liveness in terms of presence need to be discussed. In the live performance of the song "More"¹³ at the opening ceremony in 2020, holographic projections of the K/DA group members completely replaced the singers Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Jaira Burns, who were not able to be present at the ceremony due to the travel restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic - The circumstances combined with technological advancements allowed the main stage presence of the virtual characters. According to Dixon, this kind of presence showcases how the virtual and the actual converge in terms of liveness, or as Baudrillard states: "the virtual replaces the real".¹⁴ Even Auslander, who is known for his contradicting understanding of liveness that "dance + virtual = virtual", explains in an interview in 2005, that "there is great potential now to reconsider what kinds of entities can be considered dancers."¹⁵

The virtual bodies and spatial setting of K/DA

The virtual bodies of K/DA bring up the discussion of concepts about the body itself, especially of the disembodiment in dance performances as defined by Mocan.¹⁶ K-pop, which focuses heavily on performance-centered music with extensive dance choreographies, is a perfect example of this notion, as it is not focusing on the "liveness" of the performing idols, but to present the dance character of a song and "to display the idols' bodies"¹⁷ - in connection with the virtual K-pop group K/DA, their virtual bodies. Kim, Kim and Kwak proved with their classification of K-pop dance movements with motion capturing through Kinect motion sensors, that it is possible to quantify these movements based on human skeleton motion data.¹⁸ Real-life K-pop idols need to go through a rigid "idol training system" which resembles a "production machinery"¹⁹, but still need to face the reality that their physical agility will decay after a "narrow window of dance

¹¹ Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Worlds 2020 Finals, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hugv0CBh-E&t=168s

¹² Fuhr, Michael. 2016. Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

¹³ K/DA – MORE mit Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Lexie Liu, Jaira Burns und Seraphine, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VTkBuxU4yk>

¹⁴ Dixon, Steve. 2017. Digital Performance, A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation.

¹⁵ Auslander, Philip. 2005. Performance Paradigm, A Journal of Performance & Contemporary Culture.

¹⁶ Mocan, Rodica. 2017. Paradigme Critice în Performance-ul Digital Interactiv. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

¹⁷ Fuhr, Michael. 2016. Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

¹⁸ Kim, Dohyung; Kim, Dong-Hyeon; Kwak, Keun-Chang. 2017. Classification of K-Pop Dance Movements Based on Skeleton Information Obtained by a Kinect Sensor.

¹⁹ Fuhr, Michael. 2016. Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

opportunity". Inevitably, dancers need to become choreographers, leaving the performance to "other, younger bodies."²⁰ As we can see from the examples of K/DA, the published dance choreographies²¹ are completely detached - disembodied - from the real-life performers and transferred on to the animated 3D bodies of the virtual group members. This leads us to the thinking that the virtual bodies of K/DA can be seen as extensions of physically performing bodies, allowing virtual immortality through technological advancement.

In the context of corporality, it is important to mention the notion of space, or in the case of K-pop, rather non-space. In K-pop videos one distinctive feature is the lack of real places and environments. K-pop choreographies are often set in "de-localized and de-temporal" space in forms of plain or multicolored backdrops or, in the case of K/DA, digitally produced virtual spaces.²² As Augé proposes, these types of non-spaces "create neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude".²³ This type of setting not only supports K/DA's success in the disembodiment of dance performances, but also creates great opportunities for new forms of interactive spectatorship, which will be discussed in the last paragraph of this paper.

K/DA as collaborative performance within the context of interactive spectatorship

In the context of spectatorship, the interesting aspect of K/DA's live performances at the League of Legends World Championship Opening Ceremonies is the difference in spectatorship that the audience experienced, due to the fact that it was both a live event in a real location, but also broadcasted via live stream to the audience at home and still being accessible as video on demand on YouTube. While we have already analyzed the spatial presence of the virtual K-pop group at the AR live performance earlier, the "telepresence" of K/DA as defined by Auslander²⁴, which the audience experiences at home, can be seen as a novel and revolutionary way to achieve interactive spectatorship. In a field study to explore how to enhance and share spectator experiences from 2005, researchers found that users want to have a more active role in spectatorship. In the context of eSports, with Riot Games' League of Legends being a key player, streaming services like Twitch.tv have conducted tests to enhance spectator engagement and interactivity through hosting polls, voting, chat or other more traditional means of spectator involvement.²⁵

The virtual K-pop group K/DA, however, manages to enter a new sphere of interactive spectatorship, thanks to the participatory nature of K-pop fandom culture, in which fans connect to the idols in real-time by creating their own performances and interpretations of the songs and uploading them to social network

²⁰ Novak, Marcos. Liquid Architectures And The Loss of Inscription.

²¹ K/DA - POP/STARS Dance - Behind the Scenes | League of Legends , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaAkzLSg0s>

²² Fuhr, Michael. 2016. Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

²³ Augé, Marc. 1995. Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.

²⁴ Transmediale. 2011. Digital Liveness: Philip Auslander (US) about digital liveness in historical, philosophical perspective. <http://vimeo.com/20473967>

²⁵ Stahlke Samantha; Robb, James; Mirza-Babaei, Pejman. 2018. The Fall of the Fourth Wall: Designing and Evaluating Interactive Spectator Experiences. International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations.

services.²⁶ Organized public “dance flash mobs” or cosplays are also a popular form of collaborative spectator engagement.²⁷ This reverts back to the notion of presence in the context of social networks, in which presence is increasingly defined as participation.²⁸ The famous Japanese virtual idol Hatsune Miku can be seen as the perfect example of collaborative virtual art creation, as the audience can simultaneously be her producers, by writing their own songs using Hatsune Miku’s artificial voice from Vocaloid²⁹ – a singing voice software. Through their participation, the audience themselves can then “experience a part of that celebrity feel.”³⁰

Riot Games strategically pushes this aspect with their artistic product K/DA by tapping into the key features of K-pop: song and dance. The chorus of the song “Pop/Stars” evokes a feeling of a battle hymn, with lyrics that evoke identification in their audience, emphasizing on pronouns like “we” and “us”:³¹

Ain't nobody bringing us

Down down, down, down, down, down

They could try it, but we're gonna wear the crown

You could go another round

Round, round, round, round, round, round

Wish you luck, but you're not bringing us down

We go hard (hard) 'til we get it, get it

We go hard (hard), we so in it, in it

We pop stars (pop stars), only winning, winning now

Ain't nobody bringing us down, down, down, down

In fact, K/DA’s song “Pop/Stars” is being performed by hundreds of fans that can be found when searching for “K/DA Pop/Stars cover”³² on YouTube, that have diligently recreated the virtual group members’ outfits to embody the idols while performing the choreography. Some have also created their own versions of the song, with a metal version³³, a Minecraft version³⁴ and a violin, cello and piano version³⁵ being the most outstanding variations. For the release of the song “More”, Riot Games shared an official “Behind the Scenes”

²⁶ Kim, Yong Hwan; Lee, Dahee; Han; Nam Gi; Song, Min. 2014. Exploring characteristics of video consuming behaviour in different social media using K-pop videos. Journal of Information Science.

²⁷ Fuhr, Michael. 2016. Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

²⁸ Mocan, Rodica. 2017. Paradigme Critice în Performance-ul Digital Interactiv. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

²⁹ Vocaloid. <https://www.vocaloid.com/en/>

³⁰ Guga, Jelena. 2015. Virtual Idol Hatsune Miku: New Auratic Experience of the Performer as a Collaborative Platform. Arts and Technology.

³¹ K/DA - POP/STARS Lyrics. <https://genius.com/Genius-romanizations-k-da-pop-stars-romanized-lyrics>

³² YouTube Search. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=kda+popstar+cover

³³ K/DA - POP/STARS (Metal cover by Jonathan Young feat. Tre Watson). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FC3KiAYVJ8

³⁴ EnchantedMob : K/DA - POP/STARS Minecraft Music Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r5Hd9ErU2A>

³⁵ K/DA - POP/STARS | Violin, Cello and Piano Cover ft. LilyPichu, JunCurryAhn, and Jamie Kang, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX2uE_MebdU

dance tutorial of the song, to support this interactive spectatorship behavior.³⁶ The choreographed signature moves of the dance performance of “Pop/Stars”, however, is used in a different way and brings the audience back to the origin of the virtual group members – as in-game avatar skins and combat animations. This way, the audience can re-live the performance while playing the characters in a match of League of Legends.³⁷

The social network service YouTube facilitates the growth of K/DA in terms of collaborative works, fostering the embodiment of a “feeling of coherence and ontological unity”.³⁸ The spectator becomes an extension - a re-embodiment - of the dance performance. Novak suggests that through cyberculture “distance in space-time is collapsing, and everything and everyone can enjoy an unparalleled, if disincarnate, proximity” and coins the word “pantopicon”, which describes “the condition of being in all places at one time”. The repercussion of a pantopicon state is, that the “self itself becomes subject to alteration”. Identity could be multiple and distributed, with the sum not being a single entity, but a cluster of scattered information.³⁹ K/DA as virtual performers in the advent of cyberculture, could be one of the first steps in touching the Cartesian concept of dualism, in which the mind and body are completely separable. In the performances of K/DA’s songs, the spectators’ selves become an “ever-interconnected part of the whole” - a part of a “new civilization of mind”.⁴⁰

Conclusion

By creating the artistic product of a virtual K-pop girl group K/DA, Riot Games have set an astonishing standard in the usage of technical advancement for music and dance performances. Even though Riot Games is a highly commercial conglomerate, its creations open up new horizons for the academic research of performing arts in the digital age, interactive spectatorship and philosophy of technology.

³⁶ K/DA - MORE Dance - Official Choreography Video | League of Legends.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhmt50FfHOo&t=212s>

³⁷ K/DA | OFFICIAL SKINS TRAILER - LEAGUE OF LEGENDS. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg8Ub-CK7UA>

³⁸ Guga, Jelena. 2015. Virtual Idol Hatsune Miku: New Auratic Experience of the Performer as a Collaborative Platform. Arts and Technology.

³⁹ Novak, Marcos. Liquid Architectures And The Loss of Inscription.

⁴⁰ Yurtsever, Âli; Tasa, Umut Burcu. 2009. Redefining the Body in Cyberculture: Art's Contribution to a New Understanding of Embodiment.