"POP/STARS":
THE PERSONAS OF K/DA, TRANSMEDIA MARKETING, AND RIOT GAMES MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, American developer Riot Games introduced their new musical venture – K-pop virtual band K/DA – through a live augmented reality performance opening the League of Legends World Championship Finals. The band's first single – POP/STARS – quickly became a hit even outside of gaming circles, leading the developers to stage a follow-up in 2020, when the band released a full EP titled ALL OUT*. This article examines the evolution of the virtual band and its members as virtual characters, personas, and performers, at the intersection of discourses surrounding popular music, videogames, and hallyu.*

KEY WORDS

Videogames; League Of Legends; Persona; K-pop; Virtual Band

INTRODUCTION

Ahri is seen turning on the camera and sitting down to talk to her fans directly in an Instagram Reel: "Hi everyone!" she says, waving and looking directly into the camera. She is wearing a black ensemble of what appears to be a short skirt, and a long puff sleeve shirt with sheer detail, and a high collar with a bow. Her ears (she is a fox-like vastaya[1]) are poking out of her blonde hair with dip-dyed pink tips, and she is wearing three lines of shimmering make-up on each cheek, suggesting whiskers. "I hope you're enjoying the record and I hope you connected with *I'll Show You*," she says affably. She is referring to her most recent single from K/DA's 2020 *ALL OUT* EP. "Keep showing the world what you're made of and keep showing us those beautiful voices of yours. Love you all!" (kda_music 2020) She makes a hand heart and blows a kiss to the Blades (the collective name for K/DA fans). The moment feels equally warm and calculated – it is animated, after all. This brief social media video is only a small part of the content constructing the personas of the virtual band's members at the time of their return, a complex transmedia machine devised by game developer Riot Games to promote and complement the *League of Legends* universe as it has expanded beyond a wildly successful free-to-play MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) videogame into a multimedia empire including additional games, a Netflix television series, online comics, and of course music. This article explores the evolution of virtual band K/DA from their 2018 debut at the Opening Ceremony of the *League of Legends* World Championship Finals to their 2020 follow-up EP, and how they both complicate and illuminate ideas surrounding musical personas and performance.

RIOT GAMES, *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*, AND RIOT GAMES MUSIC

League of Legends was originally launched in 2009 as a free-to-play MOBA, and has since gained significant popularity and become one of the largest global competitive scenes, culminating in annual World Championships. Game studies scholars Consalvo and Paul note that *League of Legends* "was envisioned as a continually growing and changing online game that would be free for everyone, and entirely funded by optional microtransactions." (2019, p. 102) The model proved remarkably successful, and as they note, the game became "possibly one of the most influential titles in normalizing the free-to-play game model for core gamers and the games media." (Consalvo & Paul 2019, p. 101). Beyond the legitimacy that *League of Legends* bestowed on free-to-play games that Consalvo and Paul rightly note, the game's popularity and commercial success are also inextricably linked to its constant evolution and Riot's particularly savvy approach to monetisation and marketing.

Although constantly evolving and developing new content, 2014 marked a shift in Riot's strategy for the game, as the team announced a narrative turn in *League of Legends*'s storytelling. As Tommy Gnox explains in a development blog titled "Exploring Runeterra":

> At a very broad level, we've decided to push League's story beyond its original focus on explaining in-game action and forge a new narrative path for Runeterra – a world in which the factions and champions we all know and love have full freedom to grow, travel, and kick *** on a worldwide scale. From champion interactions to bios to events (and beyond), we aim to expand the scope of League's story and pursue a more dynamic and wide-ranging world fit for the outsized capabilities and personalities of our champions. (2014)

Arguably, this move had really already begun musically in 2013, when Toa Dunn, who would become Head of Riot Games Music & Entertainment, began his role as Producer (Music Development), and would spearhead a number of areas of musical development, including music videos and live performances. In the same year, Riot's first music video – *Get Jinxed* – launched, introducing the eponymous new champion who would also become a central character in the Riot Games co-produced Netflix series *Arcane* (2021). It is clear from these developments that the growth and associated marketing focused specifically on the game's champions – playable characters with associated roles and skills – and their "outsized capabilities and personalities". It is also clear that music becomes an important part of these transmedia marketing endeavours, both in terms of music videos and live performances, with Imagine Dragons providing a notable video for, and live performance at, the 2014 World Championships.

From 2013 onwards, music videos become an important means of dissemination and promotion of *League of Legends*. The champion-focused videos produced can focus on a number of different aspects of the promotional machine: they can promote the World Championships (particularly the World Championship Finals), like 2018's *RISE*, they can promote particular champions and events, like 2013's *Get Jinxed*,[2] or they can promote particular champions and associated music, like 2023's *HEARTSTEEL – PARANOIA*. Additionally, Riot Games Music has produced long-form video playlists titled 'Sessions' of what they describe as 'creator-safe' music which contain a large number of tracks that can be streamed over platforms like Twitch without the fear of copyright infringement. These are also centred around specific champions but generally feature much more minimal animation. Overall, these music videos are distinct from other trailers and cinematics in that they focus on individual champions, and feature songs that are (at least originally) not featured in the game itself. At the same time, these videos fulfil the same function of promoting the game, and specifically champions and skins (in-game

customization options that change the appearance, movements, and sound design of champions), the primary means of monetisation for the game.

In the case of K/DA and other musical endeavours, the music itself provides a transmedial bridge between the videos and the game through the sound effects of the band-themed skins – an ideal monetisation tool. Here, authenticity needs to be translated into its game form, which is "much more about how gameplay matches the player's expectations" and can often be about the "hard-to-describe feeling of whether the various components of the game appear to form a coherent, integrated whole" (Lind 2023, p. 5). Erika Haas describes how in the case of *League of Legends,* this means that the sound design should fulfil the following functions: "It should tell you how abilities work. Hard hitting spells and attacks should sound hard. Stuns should make players feel like they've been caught in a bear trap. More importantly, they shouldn't detract from gameplay" (Riot Cashmiir 2020). The translation of the music into sound effects thus entails a variety of considerations – it doesn't need to just reflect and at times directly cite the music, but it also requires design cohesion across the champions that are part of the event, cohesion in terms of previous iterations of the sound effects in terms of previous skins, context of gameplay and the champions themselves, and even playstyle, as sounds that were "really satisfying… in isolation" may become "overwhelming" when examining how players main (play as their primary/most used character) these champions in an actual play session (Riot Cashmiir 2020).

Ultimately, music acts as a throughline from the extensive marketing ventures to the gameplay itself, and balancing authenticity as part of all of these domains and discourses is crucial.

HALLYU AND K/DA

By 2018, Riot Games Music had experimented with a variety of virtual bands and artists, including metal band Pentakill and DJ Sona, as well as AR performances like the 2017 World Championship Finals in the "Bird's Nest" stadium in Beijing, in which an Elder Dragon graced the screens of millions of online viewers as an AR addition to the performance taking place live on stage. It was, however, the combination of all of these elements with the added cultural capital of Hallyu (the Korean Wave) that would expand the developers' reach far beyond gaming culture through the first live appearance of K/DA at the 2018 Opening Ceremony of the League of Legends World Championships Finals in Incheon, South Korea.

The host country – South Korea – plays an important part in the success of both this initial K/DA performance, and the band overall. On the one hand, it has historically played an important role in the development and popularisation of esports. As Taylor notes:

> When you talk to North Americans and Europeans involved in pro gaming about the development of e-sports, it does not take long for South Korea to come up in conversation. [...] South Korea is seen as a kind of promised pro gaming land. Quite often infused with a utopic-inflected "techno-Orientalism": tales are told about young men who have ascended to the level of national hero by playing computer games. The stories circle around the rise of a professional scene whose players have fan bases comparable to that of American mainstream sports stars. They hold contracts and sponsorship deals, wear the latest in sport gear from Nike and Adidas, and play in competitions that regularly draw thousands and are broadcast on major television channels. (Taylor 2012, p. 17)

Jin argues that this is at least in part because esports specifically, defined by a mass spectatorship, is a phenomenon that began in South Korea (Jin 2020). Both Jin and Rea credit some of this popularisation to the early development and adoption of high-speed internet, as well as early institutionalisation and mainstream broadcasting (Jin 2020). Furthermore, through the growth of PC bangs (Internet cafés), formation of professional leagues as early as 1997, and the launch of StarCraft (Blizzard 1998), esports became a cultural phenomenon in South Korea and beyond (Jin 2020). As Rea notes, "not only have esports had a significant impact on Korean popular culture, Korea has also influenced the development of global esports" (2016, p. 22). *League of Legends* itself has a large following in South Korea as an esport and the latter is home to one of four franchised regional leagues across the globe (League of Legends Champions Korea).

At the same time, South Korea is of course the homeland of K-pop. Itself a global phenomenon, K-pop is a significant cultural touchstone. As Lee argues, the term K-pop "cannot be considered a symbol that captures the substance of Korean popular music in its full dimensions" but has "essentially meant idol groups' dance music in the global topography" (2017, p. 172). *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop* similarly focuses on 'idol-centered pop music that has emerged since the 1990s, primarily featuring young performers for multimedia entertainment catering to the younger generation of fans and consumers (Kim 2023, p.4). In other words, the term is used here not to refer to the entirety of Korean popular music, but to a specific genre that has gained international popularity and can be defined not only musically, but also in terms of specific industrial practices, as well as specific target audiences. Koo and Sung argue that the global rise of K-pop as we know it "is easily traceable to origins in Taiwan, from which it spread to other Chinese-speaking areas" (2016, p. 208). While it is undoubtedly a transnational sensation and a form of soft power supported by governmental policies in the same way as esports, Lee does caution that "it would be an exaggeration to say that K-pop has had a presence substantial enough to create an upheaval in the international pop music market" (2016, p. 171). Jung-Min Mina Lee, however, argues that 2017 ushered in a new phase in which "K-pop has experienced a heightened level of global attention and popularity," marked by BTS winning the Billboard Social Artists Award (Lee 2023, p. 62). The genre is thus more popular than ever.

The two phenomena – esports and K-pop – stand under the broader banner of Hallyu or the "Korean wave." Originally, Hallyu was "a term coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s that punned the pronunciation of two characters for Korea (韓) and wave (流) with another compound expression, 'cold current' (寒流)" (Kim 2011, p. 1) and described the popularity of K-drama and later other Korean cultural products in China. In 1999, the term begins to be used by the Korean government, whereby "Korea's Ministry of Culture and Tourism produced and distributed a music album entitled 'Hallyu-Songs from Korea' to promote Korean popular music overseas" (Hong et al. 2019, p. 113). It has since grown to encapsulate many aspects of Korean culture, including film, skincare, foods, and of course, both esports and K-pop. The glocal nature of the phenomena, their transnational popularity, and their wide audiences made it both natural and exceptionally shrewd for Riot Games to draw on the cultural capital of Hallyu in the development and launch of K/DA as a virtual K-pop group in 2018, building both on their existing esports fanbase, and potentially drawing in new audiences from K-pop fandom.

VIRTUALITY AND K-POP

Virtual pop stars and pop groups are not in themselves a novelty. While Zaborowski argues that "in the digital music age, it could be argued that all idols are virtual" (2016, p. 111), Conner

looks at those performers that are more explicitly virtual, arguing that they have been a staple of popular culture since at least the 1950s, whereby:

> the first virtual pop star many North Americans encountered was a squeaky-voiced, animated rodent trio – an audio gimmick that, coupled with some cartoon imagery on a series of record covers and a resulting prime-time television show, evolved into a global and long-lasting animated music brand: Alvin and the Chipmunks. (2016, p. 132)

K/DA can thus be situated within a long-standing tradition of virtual popstars, from the carefully curated world of *Gorillaz*, created as a critique of manufactured pop music, to the crowdsourced embrace of artificiality that vocaloids like Hatsune Miku represent. K/DA have a team of artists and musicians behind them – many of whom discuss their work publicly in promotional development material (like Dev Doodles and blog posts) – as well as an interchangeable array of performers lending them their voices and movements, aligning them with other virtual idol bands (e.g. Eternity). Their identities are constructed through transmedia storytelling, whereby "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006, pp. 97–98), and can also be seen as drawing from the Japanese practice of "media mix" which entails "creating, marketing, circulating and engaging with cultural goods serially across media types" (Steinberg 2023, p. 1). The creation and evolution of K/DA occurs across these various media, each of which offers "a point of entry into the franchise as a whole" (Jenkins 2006, p. 98) while also ultimately shaping their pop personas through "a vast network of meaningful texts and events" that "operate in relation to each other in a complex interplay" (Hansen 2019, pp. 524–525).

Furthermore, the development of the band draws on the K-pop band model and broader Japanese and Korean idol traditions. Zaborowski describes Japanese idols as follows:

> Although there seems to be no set definition of aidoru, the lines between "idols" and "non-idols" are most frequently drawn around the portrayed persona (idols are pure, down-to-earth, and easy to relate to), affiliated agency and management style (idols often form groups and are banned from dating, and their image remains heavily controlled), music style (idols sing mostly bubbly pop) and abilities (idols often possess no special singing talents; more valued is the effort they put in, and their proximity to the audience). (Zaborowski 2016, p. 114)

While Korean idols diverge somewhat from this definition, including in terms of musical style, sometimes they exacerbate elements of the Japanese idol tradition, particularly in their infamous regimented training before groups are launched by their agencies. As Lee argues, the "exclusive entertainment production system" of K-pop idols is one of the main mechanisms through which cultural capital is reproduced (Lee 2017, p. 176). The importance of the band structure in K-pop also cannot be underestimated; while fulfilling different roles and providing different sources of appeal is typical of many manufactured pop bands, K-pop appears to be particularly regimented, with performers selected to play specific roles within a band structure based on specific skills (vocal abilities, dancing skills, and language proficiency for instance). The development of K/DA follows many of these generic conventions, including the crafting of their portrayed personas, the musical style, and the band structure.

In a "Dev Doodles" video, Riot Games staff explain that they started the development of the band with the K-pop genre in mind specifically because of the location of the 2018 World Championships. They also drew on a previous skin that was previously created for champion

Ahri, titled 'Pop Star', which led to her becoming the leader of a a girl band. The rest of the champions who would become band members were then picked to fit the genre and feel of the music, but also to fulfil certain roles within both the band and the game. As creative lead for the POP/STARS video Patrick Morales describes, "one of the things people love about pop groups is that the well-defined archetypes make it easy for people to find a favorite" (in Won and Oak 2018).[3] In K-Pop, these personas are carefully constructed both individually and in putting together idol groups. On an individual level, Choi describes how performing techniques are honed through training regimens, and how, "based on each trainee's personality and talents, the company assigns them a role as a vocalist, rapper, or dancer." (Choi, 2023, p. 143) Then, in the creation of groups, a 'concept' is set by the producers (Choi, 2023, p. 143) and this dictates musical and dance style, costuming, and the general creative direction of the new group. The characteristics of idol trainees are then taken into consideration in the selection of the best personas to fill the roles within a specific concept (Choi 2023, p. 150). In the case of K/DA, as Laura 'Nusliful' Die (K/DA Brand Manager) explains, they moved away from the more 'bubble-gum' style and drew on what she describes at the "trend in empowered women that all feel really strong" in K-pop (League of Legends 2019). Known as 'girl crush,' this particular concept features young women who "present a fierce, strong, sexy, independent, trendy 'badass' image" and "are known for their ferocity and individualistic characters who empower and inspire female fans across the globe" (Oh 2023, p. 104). Therefore, four virtual personas were created as alternate versions of in-game champions: Ahri, Akali, Evelynn, and Kai'SA. Within the band, they perform traditional roles: Ahri is the leader and main vocalist, Evelynn is the lead vocal and offers a contrasting personality (mysterious and dark to counterbalance Ahri's relatability and optimism), Akali is the main rapper, and Kai'Sa is the main dancer. This is similar to other K-pop bands; in BLACKPINK, for instance, Jennie is the main rapper, Rosé is the main vocalist, Lisa is the main dancer, and Jisoo is lead vocalist. The musicians that play K/DA in this original 2018 incarnation also represent the world of K-pop through Soyeon (소연) and Miyeon (미연), of the at the time relatively new band (G)I-dle ((여자)아이들), but combine it with the world of American pop through the addition of Madison Beer and Jaira Burns. The music draws on 'girl crush' K-pop girl bands like BLACKPINK and ITZY and features lyrics in English and Korean, with a K-pop inspired choreography.

The development of the band, the members' personas, and later their individual narratives, are thus deeply rooted in generic conventions and build clear musical (in terms of the 'girl crush' sound and lyrical content, for instance), institutional (in terms of both the institutional practices used, and employing artists from the K-pop idol system), and socio-cultural (in terms of the narratives employed and relationship to fandom) connections to K-pop as a genre. Ultimately, as Auslander notes, "our social experience of music is radically incomplete if we do not have a sense of what kind of music we are experiencing" (Auslander, 2006, pp. 105–106). The signifiers of K-pop – not only the music itself, but numerous elements from the launch of an accompanying dance video to the branding of official light sticks (a staple of idol pop groups) – therefore play an important part in how the band is perceived by its audience and how the music is experienced. Furthermore, as Fairchild and Marshall note:

> Genre and music clearly inform our conceptualization of what a musical performance means. It provides context and socially built signifying structures that identify what might be called a persona range; but genre indexically points to the way that music is also a commodity form in its capacity to identify why an audience would be drawn to a performance or purchase, download or stream a recording. (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 8)

Ultimately, K-pop provides the context and structures that frame K/DA/s performances, acts as an important factor in their commercial success, and is particularly significant in their further development as virtual performers, starting with the band's debut in 2018.

THE PERSONAS AND PERFORMERS OF K/DA

The band's launch entailed the live performance of their first single POP/STARS at the *League of Legends* World Championship finals, the simultaneous release of the video for the song, and a choreography video launched three days later. The live online performance featured the four physically present musicians performing alongside the AR (Augmented Reality) versions of the characters they were playing on a large outdoor stage. The countdown already introduced the four characters and their new incarnations before the real-life performers joined the stage. Throughout the performance itself, the two K/DAs mirror each others' choreography, with the AR characters centre stage and demonstrating their supernatural abilities as they teleport and spark, while also wearing visible microphone headsets. They are thus not simply characters on a screen, not simple visual accompaniment, but foregrounded as performers who are singing and dancing in front of an audience of millions.

In contrast, the music video features the characters performing in real-life everyday locations that diverge from the original fantasy setting of the game. As head of Riot Girl Music Toa Dunn describes it:

> Looking at pop music, artists often tap into this element of fantasy to elevate the aesthetic and storytelling of their art, right? It's what gives musicians this very sort of mythic quality, right, it makes them feel mysterious, special, and timeless. K/DA is unique in the sense that we already come from a place of fantasy, they're characters from a game – these are ninjas, demons, and assassins – so where do you go there? The answer was actually pretty simple – you go the other direction. You find ways to root them in reality. You find ways to make them feel believable as an actual pop group. (Dunn in Purslow 2021)

Such instances include assassin Akali on a subway train and nine-tailed fox Ahri in a laundromat. They are not stripped of their supernatural powers, but they are also grounded in a version of reality – not ours, nor that of Runeterra, in which *League of Legends* is set – but that of what Dunn would describe as the Riot "music universe" (Purslow 2021). This is the universe of personas made literal, albeit virtual. In other words, what Dunn does not acknowledge is that rooting the larger-than-life persona of a pop star in some kind of reality, of conferring authenticity and relatability, is in fact an essential touchstone of all popular music (if not all music). As Moore argues, authenticity is "ascribed, not inscribed" and this process occurs "from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position." (2002, p. 210) He also acknowledges that it can, and has been ascribed to a wide variety of genres beyond his specific focus of largely rock and contemporary folk (2002). Here, what Moore describes as "authenticity of execution," or succeeding in "accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance" (2002, p. 218) is developed through the multiple connections built to K-pop as a genre, while grounding the characters in 'reality' and then developing them as personas can be seen as an important step in conferring both "authenticity of expression," whereby "an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/ her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience" (ibid., p. 214) as well as "authenticity of experience," which entails "conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them." (ibid., p. 220) In other words, as these characters become personas, they are also able to confer the impression of both expressing themselves and connecting to

others, both contributing to the perception of their performances as authentic. Moreover, the work of developing these personas and the sense of authenticity is made explicit as the band evolves, as exemplified in the band's 2020 return.

The 2020 campaign developed over social media channels and a series of webcomics titled *K/DA Harmonies*, each focusing on one of the virtual performers as well as guest Seraphine, before the launch of the band's first EP *ALL OUT* in November 2020. Following the pre-release of single *The Baddest*, the EP included the single *More*, featuring all members of the group as well as three singles attributed to individual members – Evelynn's *Villain*, Ahri's *I'll Show You*, and Akali's *Drum Go Dum*.

Each performer is developed both individually and in relation to the other performers in the band. Ahri is portrayed as a strong and tough leader. In the first issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020a), we see the band in the recording studio, and Ahri – ever the perfectionist – is making the group record the chorus of one of their tracks over and over again. It is heavily implied that this has been going on for quite some time. The fifth issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020e) cuts back to this moment before going into a flashback to 2015, where Ahri is already a pop star (referencing her earlier skin), but unhappy with the lack of control she has over her music and her image. It then shows her meeting with Evelynn in 2016 and planning to break her contract to start her own group. *I'll Show You*, her single from the EP also builds on this narrative of finding her voice and becoming a leader. Authenticity and strength are central themes in this track, as she sings "I'll show you what I'm made of/ Rise to the occasion/ Got fears but I'll face them." The video plays with imagery of mirrors and glass – of seeing oneself and breaking through – while also using a significant amounts of photographs from Ahri's past. As Moore notes, this "commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives, but what matters to listeners is whether such subjection appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with, by those to whom they are listening" (2002, p. 218). Thus, the video positions Ahri as an ambitious artist holding on to her authentic self (represented by the image of her as a schoolgirl) despite the self-doubt and the pressures of the music industry, resisting these 'commercial imperatives.'

Evelynn remains mysterious in both her comic and her video, and her appearances outside of the two are minimal. Her issue of the comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020c) actually follows one of her fans waiting for a new K/DA single. The readers see Evelynn from the perspective of her fan, experiencing their 2018 debut, then reading paparazzi snippets about her, and finally seeing her sports car (license plate DIVA) and following it to a night club. Evelynn and the fan then have a brief moment together after the former is seen to refuse an offer to leave the band. The idea of authenticity is once again reinforced: she is both an artist who refuses to prioritise commercial gain, and truly loyal to the other members of the band, as well as their fans. This is not only "authenticity of expression," in that her integrity and her support of other women are emphasised, but also "authenticity of experience" in that the comic emphasises this "place of belonging" created for the Blades (the fans of K/DA) (Moore, 2002, p. 2019). On the other hand, her single 'Villain' and accompanying video are the least rooted in real-world (or persona-world) narratives. As she sings "Imma straight up villain/ Straight up villain/ Yeah not feeling/ Yeah no feeling" the imagery of the video plays into traditional tropes suggesting danger including writhing snakes, flames and enveloping smoke, and dark, distorted spaces devoid of any human presence.

Kai'Sa's comic (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020d) focuses on her passion for dance. It explores her loneliness as a child who travels a lot due to her father's work and finds

refuge in dance. When she chooses to forego a place at a prestigious ballet institute to form her own studio, she is also discovered by the rest of the band, and she finds a home in K/DA where she can both find her own way and be part of something. Her track – *Drum Go Dum* – is also accompanied by the only live action video from K/DA's catalogue (that is not explicitly a choreography video). With an onomatopoeic chorus reminiscent of BLACKPINK's 뚜두뚜두 *(DDU-DU DDU-DU)*, the song also features a video that focuses almost entirely on the performance of Korean-American dancer Bailey Sok, interspersed with flashes of Kai'Sa's face, suggesting her presence throughout.

Akali is perhaps the least developed of the virtual performers. Her comic (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020a) focuses on her support of Seraphine as well as her relationship with both the other members of K/DA and True Damage – Riot Games's follow-up band for the 2019 World Championship Finals, of which Akali was also a member. While she doesn't have a dedicated solo song, she is credited as one of the main producers of the music, and she also features in a Genius video explaining the lyrics to the main single from the EP – *More* (Genius 2020). Here, Akali deconstructs lyrics like "Akali that girl/ Kali go grr", explaining how she channels her feelings into her flow. Confident but also self-conscious, she leans into the same narrative of self-assurance, authenticity, and striving for success.

The narratives here clearly follow a neoliberal fantasy of pop success while simultaneously drawing on what Epstein and Turnbull describe as the "ambivalent empowerment" of K-Pop gender ideologies (2013, p. 315) explicitly referenced by Die in relation to the development of the group, as well as a 'girlboss' version of the American Dream. The original four performers who played K/DA in 2018 themselves embody the duality of American and Korean pop music narratives: both Madison Beer and Jaira Burns began their careers by uploading covers to YouTube before finding mainstream fame, while Soyeon and Miyeon are members of Korean pop group (G)I-dle formed by talent agency Cube Entertainment, and are known for their involvement in the writing and production of their own music in a way that is uncommon for K-pop groups. The ambivalence (and perhaps irony) here is in no way hidden: the real performers are women ostensibly in control of their own careers and artistic visions, and so are the virtual performers of K/DA; at the same time, K/DA remains a manufactured virtual band, representing the vision and corporate interests of Riot Games, a transnational corporation with a history of gender discrimination and sexual harassment allegations (McCracken and Negron 2018). Like other aspects of K/DA, however, this is just a more exaggerated version of relationships and contradictions that are inevitable at the intersection of two creative industries – music and videogames – that are historically exploitative, and particularly exploitative of women. These complex industrial and socio-cultural issues underpin the development of the virtual characters, personas and performers at play, revealing the relationships between their construction (or rather deconstruction) and broader contexts.

CHARACTER – PERSONA – PERFORMER

The combined virtual and pre-existing nature of the four members of K/DA result in a unique deconstruction of the relationship between characters, personas, and performers. In other words, each K/DA band member is explicitly crafted as a persona from the start, as "a performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer's 'real' identity." (Auslander 2006, p. 102) Auslander's description is literally realised in the development of the band as fictional characters are refashioned into explicit personas – musical personalities fitting into a clear K-pop mould – before real performers are chosen to fit

the personas, often with additional performers to elaborate on the multiple facets of the personas.

The 2018 live performance already presents a complex layering of performers, personas, and characters. The real-life artists and virtual characters on one side, and twin sets of personas on the other (the personas of the real-life performers, and those of the virtual ones), or rather at the intersection of the two – two iterations drawing on a web of cultural capital spanning K-pop, American pop, videogames, and esports. Although Frith argues that "*all* live performance involves both spontaneous action and the playing of a role" (1999, p. 207) it is evident that because of the nature of the performance and its pre-recorded elements, the playing of a role is foregrounded here. The 2020 follow-up, however, extrapolates virtual performers from the virtual personas. Auslander argues that "musical performance [...] is a form of self-presentation, again with the understanding that some presentations of self may be perceived as personally expressive while others may not" (Auslander 2016, p. 103). In this context, however, the self that is being presented is itself manufactured *from* the persona and thus is entirely "personally expressive" in a way that is perhaps more coherent than with traditional forms of performance.

This evolution in which virtual performers and then virtual personas are extrapolated from and added to the initial *League of Legends* characters for a complex layering effect also required the involvement of an audience. Auslander focuses significantly on audience's investment in personas, going so far as to describe audiences as cocreators of personas in general (Auslander 2006, p. 115). The 2020 campaign reflects not only the importance of audiences in this process, but particularly that of fandom as participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). Much of the preparatory campaign before the launch of the *ALL OUT* EP focuses on fan-produced covers of K/DA's POP/STARS, cosplay, and dance videos, shared all over the band's social media accounts with appropriate hashtags. The importance of fans is also emphasised throughout the band's own transmedia marketing materials, from Ahri's address to the fans explored at the beginning of this paper, to Evelynn's comic and its explicit focus on a fictional fan and their relationship to her. Moreover, the guest star on single *More*, Seraphine, is herself initially depicted as a fan of the band playing covers of their music, building into convergence narratives relevant both to contemporary music discourses and videogame discourses.

At the same time, the campaign also includes what Auslander (drawing on Goffman) describes as "dramatization":

> making visible work which goes into a particular routine that the audience would not otherwise see, so that the performer can get credit for it; and also with presenting an idealized image to the audience (in this context, idealized means conforming to the audience's existing expectations of a certain kind of person). (Auslander 2006, p. 111)

The work of both real and fictional performers is made visible in this way in every performance, but labour is also further emphasised throughout social media, as well as the *K/DA Harmonies* series of webcomics. In the latter, the framing device for the series shows the K/DA members literally at work in the recording studio, while Instagram and Twitter posts, for instance, show them physically training, making appearances at fashion shows, posing for advertising campaigns (including the Riot-Louis Vuitton collaboration) or tired in the dance studio. As Frith notes, "far from wanting the means of production to be concealed, the popular audience wants to see how much has gone into its entertainment. Performance as labor is a necessary part of the popular aesthetic." (1999, p. 207) This clearly remains true of relatable virtual performers

as much as real-life ones, and working hard to get to the top is an essential part of each of the members' narratives.

Furthermore, the foregrounding of labour also plays into discourses surrounding authenticity, which nearly all of the marketing material emphasises, particularly the comic series. Setting aside the irony of manufactured performers always discussing the importance of being their true selves, this particular flavour of authenticity is also complicated by the contemporary blurring of the lines between public and private. As Hansen notes, "the mobility of pop artists across various spheres of popular culture highlights their role as celebrities – public figures – as much as musicians" (2019, p. 511) where "public personae are commonly characterized by, and promoted as, a display of the private" (ibid., p. 512). Discourses surrounding K-pop specifically focus on both labour and authenticity as exemplified through the importance of talent shows to the idol industry, in which it is not only the elements of competition and effort that are emphasised, but also the contestants' backstories as displays of the private which "serve as evidence of [their] authenticity." (Maliangkay 2023, p. 12) The personas of idols are carefully constructed even outside of talent shows, where "it is common for companies to control the idols' behavior, relationships, and online activities, especially in their early career before they have a fan base" (Choi, 2023, p. 149). Fairchild and Marshall describe the "transformation of the public self" as a "central impetus behind the emergence of persona studies" (2019, p. 8) and thus these converging registers are integral to the discussion of K/DA as both virtual performers and virtual personas, especially in the context of K-pop.

Overall, the journey from character to performer reveals important aspects of contemporary discourses surrounding popular music, from the fashionable but potentially problematic female empowerment discourses in contemporary pop, to the traditional importance of discourses surrounding authenticity as well as labour.

Conclusion: Seraphine

K/DA were gradually developed into fully realised performer-persona constructs over a number of years, themselves representing the same evolutionary principle as *League of Legends* itself. Virtual performer Seraphine, however, appears fully realised as she joins the group for their 2020 single *More*.

Seraphine was initially launched as a Chinese-American virtual influencer with a presence on social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram. Here she primarily shared covers of a variety of artists including K/DA themselves, but also shared selfies and other images, reshared the music of others, and talked about her mental health struggles. In her issue of the *Harmonies* series of comics (Yichao and HD of Rainforest Culture 2020b), she is presented as working in café while recording music in her bedroom when she is discovered by K/DA and invited to collaborate on the single. Developed as a virtual influencer and performer before revealed as persona and character, Seraphine takes the virtual pop star even further, synthesising all of the narratives of the other members of K/DA. Played primarily by Chinese pop star Lexie Liu, she made her first live appearance at the 2020 *League of Legends* World Championship Final in Shanghai.

As in previous live appearances for the finals, the song included lyrics in Mandarin as a nod to the event's host country that also happens to be a savvy marketing decision that can potentially expand the reach of the band's music. China, like South Korea, also plays an important, albeit more controversial role in contemporary esports, not only as a "contender" as Taylor notes (2012, p. 17), but as the home of Riot Games' parent company Tencent, the largest videogame producer in the world and a stakeholder in a large number of transnational game

companies. Furthermore, the conglomerate has also been the focus of a variety of controversies, perhaps most notably a number of controversies surrounding censorship (outside of their Chinese operation) and surveillance (as described in the complaint filed by Citizen Power Initiatives for China v. Tencent America, 2021). In this context, the fact that Seraphine is explicitly described as Chinese-American rather than Chinese raises questions about not only what virtual performers reveal, but what they can obscure.

Ultimately, virtual pop stars controlled by transnational corporations inevitably represent those corporations' interests and not necessarily those of their audiences or those of the real-life artists contributing to the art that those virtual pop stars put out. At the intersection of commercial and political interests, it is difficult not to question what can happen when real-life performers are interchangeable behind the personas of virtual stars.

END NOTES

[1] A chimeric species in the universe of League of Legends.

[2] Thompson notes that World Championship promotional videos are distinct in the landscape of Riot Games Music videos in that they feature well-known esports players as well as in-game champions, illustrating what he describes as a 'projective identity' (2019). Drawing on the work of James Paul Gee (2003), Thompson examines how these 'projective identities,' which exist between the esports athletes' 'real-life identities' and their chosen in-game champions (the champions they 'main' or primarily choose to play), the 'virtual identities,' are depicted in videos like *RISE* (2018).

[3] Product lead for the K/DA Skins Janelle Jimenez also noted that their roles in the game were also important "from a product perspective," as ultimately the specific skins that are part of the project are an important part of the monetisation of the game, and multiple roles mean that they can be sold to a wider variety of players.

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