

Objects of Affection: Kissing Games on Mobile Devices

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ABSTRACT

This brief paper provides general context in the emerging mobile space of affection games. Affection games require players to flirt, hug, or kiss to meet their goals in the game. To date, the largest subset of those games, are kissing games. The paper provides a topographic analysis of the 10 most widely distributed kissing games in 2013 and 2014, which account for more than 3,000,000 mobile game installations. To add detail to the overview, two case studies are provided which exemplify non-digital, physical device kissing and virtual kissing in mobile games. The download activity, player comments, and history of the games are used to provide a simple overview of affection game characteristics as they relate to human-computer interaction and play. Such analysis provides a peek into the mildly taboo affection games and the ways in which mobile developers are effecting the genre.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [Games]; K.4.2 [Social Issues]

General Terms

Design, Economics, Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Affection games; digital affection; mobile games; Human Computer interaction; non-virtual game interactions, kissing games

1. INTRODUCTION

User relationships to the smart devices they carry have bounced between love and hate [18]. With their growing ubiquity, the nature of that relationship has changed. In many countries smart phones are no longer convenience, they are necessity. Whether used to pay parking meters or check in to flights, they function as daily assistants. With that growth, a fascinating change has occurred in the way we play on these phones. Beyond the 30-year history of casual games that have propagated varied versions of Snake, Pac Man, Angry Birds, and Flappy Bird – a new genre is rising in the mobile game community. The newly popularized Affection Game has arrived as a form of human computer interaction. Affection games require players to flirt, hug, kiss or make love to meet their needs [8]. Affection games are not dating simulations, as affection games don't focus on establishing

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relationships, simply on the act of affection.

It is not clear if the growth in these types of games is the result of shifting demographics or emerging patterns in the relationship between digital play and social interaction [11] [12]. It can be hypothesized that affection is yet another dimension of the social self that has been usurped into the digital paradigm. It could also be hypothesized that the low cost of such devices has widened the demographic, creating a demand for a wider variety of playable experiences. It might also be hypothesized that the fundamental human relationship to ubiquitous mobile devices has changed, potentially making the expression of affection through these devices less awkward.

This paper does not aim to answer such questions in the absolute, but instead provides an overview of such games and offers two case studies in affection games. To do so, the paper provides a simple background in affection games and reports on the most widely distributed kissing games. It then analyzes the primary source content, user comments, and historical play record of two popular affection games for mobile devices. The result is a detailed view, extending the previously published research conducted through broad content analysis [8] and social-cultural examination [10].

There has been little research into digital affection games. Historically, Brian Sutton-Smith's 1959 examination of physical kissing games provides some foundation [20]. In the research he expresses the social value of examining affection play. As Sutton-Smith explains, like the examination of other forms of play, affection provides an inroads into cultural phenomenon as well as providing demonstrative artifacts of taboo and standards. In short, affection games are yet another lens to understanding the meaning of human interactions. Surprisingly, there has been little research into the human-computer interactions of digital affection games. Given the rich gender typing, unique HCI, and confluence of techno-cultural attributes, such analysis seems overdue. Several researchers have investigated gender preference [15] and sexual representations in games. These include [3] and [4]. Others have looked at gender roles [16] or argued for more discussion of sex and HCI [22].

2. BACKGROUND

Affection games are produced by a variety of independent developers across the world. The dominant developers are based in the United States, the Netherlands, South Korea, China and Japan [8]. They are likewise consumed by a variety of international community members, as they are offered on clearinghouse websites and mobile retail stores worldwide. The characters and languages vary, but the general mechanics are largely the same, despite regional socio-cultural differences. When taboo and communication of affection varies between these

players, the digitally mediated affection games are largely unified [10].

By tallying search results and App Annie data it is estimated that at least 500 digital affection games were available in 2014. A 2013 comprehensive content analysis indicated 299 distinct kissing games, 78 flirting games, and 4 hugging games [8]. In the Google Play store, the largest mobile repository of affection games, a simple search for “kissing games” yields more than 250 apps. These include games depicting in game affection and games designed to facilitate such affection between two or more players. Admittedly, pinning down the number of affection games on mobile outlets is particularly problematic, as many games are delisted or discontinued daily (commonly for developer contract violations). They also tend to be short experiences, with an average level time of less than 3 minutes across kissing, hugging and flirting games [8]. Focusing solely on mobile play, the most compelling experiences for academic study in the affection game space are kissing games. They are the most widely distributed games in the genre that also commonly offer virtual and non-virtual interactions.

2.1 Non-Virtual and Virtual Affection

In general, kissing games can be divided into two categories; non-virtual and virtual play. Non-virtual kissing games require players to kiss the screen of their mobile device to replicate kissing an onscreen character or object. Virtual games require players to manipulate their avatar and a non-player character to express affection. The player must either kiss literally (non-virtual) or kiss virtually. Virtual kissing games were the standard model for web-playable affection games. The ubiquity of touch sensitive screens has made non-virtual kissing games more practical.

Previously, non-virtual affection game experiences were limited to custom hardware solutions. These include the Kiss Controller [17], Big Huggin’ [9] and Musical Embrace [13]. The growth of non-virtual affection games can be interpreted as offering new opportunities for human-computer and human-robotic interface.

3. Research Methodology Overview

To provide a general overview of affection games and extend previous research, this study analyzed the estimated 500 affection games provided on Google Play. Google Play was chosen because its game content restrictions support the dissemination of affection games. In contrast, Apple has explicit content and use restrictions that substantially limit affection game distribution on their platform. Apple has claimed that the human saliva potentially involved in kissing poses physical risk to the surface of Apple mobile devices. Apple’s App store contains only 28 affection games. This difference in number of games available may reflect the techno-cultural stance the two companies have taken about such play.

Affection games are a relatively private type of human computer interaction. Few of these games are played in large groups or in public. Some players are reluctant to admit that they have played such games, as the affectionate interaction between human and computer is somewhat taboo across multiple cultures. Identifying and recruiting players of affection games is particularly troublesome for these reasons. Instead, this research uses third party aggregate data to provide a peek into the affection games space. Arguably, the benefit of such an analysis is that players provide candid responses through the Internet’s relative

anonymity and far from the potentially imposing sterility of a research laboratory.

To provide an accurate and useful case study, two of the most popular kissing games were chosen for analysis. Their app activity as recorded on Google Play is analyzed as a way to understand the general character of affection.

4. Overview of Widely Distributed Kissing Games

The 10 most widely distributed affection games account for more than 3 million installations via Google Play’s app store. This research tabulated distribution statistics trapped by the App Annie commercial analytics aggregator and corroborated through public data from the Google Play store.

Table 1 outlines the general characteristics of ten of the most widely distributed kissing games. Each of these games recorded more than 100,000 installations since their initial release date. All of the games are free, although 1 of them supports in-App purchasing. Analyzing the most popular games provides some insight into player interest.

Table 1. Characteristics of 10 widely distributed Kissing Games

Game Name	Non-virtual	Recorded Installs	Initial Release Date	Supports in -App Purchases
Kissing Test Prank	Yes	1,000,000+	2/23/2012	No
Mermaid Kiss	No	500,000+	2/9/2014	No
Give a Kiss	Yes	500,000+	12/6/2012	Yes
Summer Kiss Test	Yes	500,000+	7/20/2013	No
Kissing Games	No	500,000+	3/25/2014	No
Princess Kissing on Beach	No	100,000+	9/19/14	No
Kissing Game: First Date	No	100,000+	4/11/2014	No
Kissing Test (free)	Yes	100,000+	12/29/2009	No
Kiss Me! Lip Testing Game	Yes	100,000+	3/21/2014	No
Classroom Kissing	No	100,000+	8/8/2012	No

This data indicates a few commonly understood, but not explicitly proven characteristics of mobile kissing games. Non-virtual games are at least as popular as virtual kissing games, accounting for 50% of the top 10 or more than 2 million installs. This last observation is important, as the previous generation of kissing games, as web games, offered no opportunity for non-virtual kissing.

Installations are not the only important factor in understanding popular affection games. The developer profiles and ranks also provide insight into who makes such games. Table 2 illuminates two important observation, popular affection games are typically made by independent developers and these relatively niche games do rank in their respective categories. Missing from the list of the top affection game developers are the names of mobile game juggernauts like Rovio or Electronic Arts. Instead, the developers are app makers from with portfolio ranging from 5 to 528 products. This demonstrates the range of developers and the relative accessibility of the genre for independent game makers.

Examining the rankings also helps contextualize these games in the wider space of mobile play. Kissing Test (free) outshines all

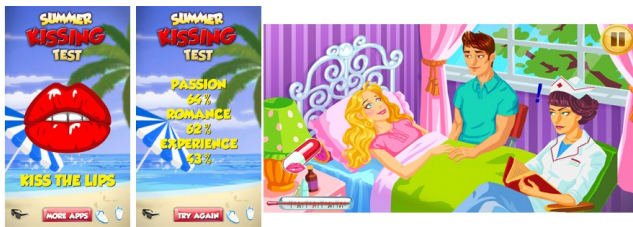
others in garnering a top 100 rank in more than 118 countries. The average game from this earned a top 100 rank in 20 countries. Admittedly, 2 of these widely distributed games have never spent a single day in a top 100 list.

Table 2. Overview of country ranking history and game developers

Name	Number of Top 100 country listings	Developer Name	Number of other Apps by Developer
Kissing Test Prank	15	Dexati	528
Mermaid Kiss	6	Abc Casual Games	6
Give a Kiss	3	Exa Mobile SA	67
Summer Kiss Test	7	Photo Editors and Picture Effects	30
Kissing Games	4	Enegon	28
Princess Kissing on Beach	2	mGamey	63
Kissing Game: First Date	0	Vizzgames	18
Kissing Test (free)	118	Bell Standard Inc	5
Kiss Me! Lip Testing Game	18	Top Trending Apps	24
Classroom Kissing	0	Girls Games 123	25

Notably, four of the top 10 selling games are rated for “everyone”, while 3 are rated high maturity by the developers. These games receive an average of 9,738 reviews, ranging from as few as 1,483 for Classroom Kissing to as many as 68,121 for Kissing Test (free). The most popular games include 4 kiss testers. For these games, players kiss the device and receive a score reflecting the quality of the kiss. The other 6 games are conventional player character to non-player character affections. What’s important to note however, while the mechanics are fairly straightforward the kissing scenarios are what differentiate the games. Players can kiss as a princess, a mermaid or in the classroom. These content cues help illuminate for whom these games are marketed.

Affection games are not a super-genre, like sports or simulation, but they do demonstrate an increase in popularity. The following section uses two typical, popular games, Summer Kissing Test and Princess Kissing as case to provide a more detailed understanding of content and player reception. Given that many of these games provide a kind of procedural rhetoric about the purpose and value of affection they are worthy of critical analysis.



5. CASE STUDY 1
Figure 1. Screenshot of Summer Kissing Test (left) and Princess Kissing (right)

5.1 Summer Kissing Test, Non-virtual Affection

Summer Kissing Test, like other mobile kiss testers, is a modern interpretation of the late 19th century convention of love testers. Players touch their lips to the screen and practice kissing to receive a score. The game’s main attraction comes from its

description - “Are you a good kisser? Download this new kissing game for girls and boys and find out! [19].

Released on July 20th, 2013, to date the free game has received more than 500,000 downloads. Its highest ranking on Google’s charts was on September 30th, 2013, when it ranked #44 of all personalization apps on Google Play in Spain. It has achieved a top 100 ranking in the personalization category in 7 countries. The highest daily ranks for the app were in Spain (#44), Greece (#68), Romania (#69), Hungary (#76), Finland (#80), Austria (#88) and Slovakia (#88). The app was also just short of that marker in Brazil (#109) and Portugal (#110). In terms of installs, a top 100 ranking places the app in the top 1% of downloads in its category. There are 87,378 apps in the personalization category [2]. 8% of those, or 6,918 have achieved more than 50,000 downloads [2]. It is also important to note that the app is not offered in a game category. Instead, it is offered as a personalization app, which may be the result of selective marketing, algorithm discovery sales choices or a nod to the rather personal interaction of this affection game.

Reviews for the game are typical for an affection game. Players either love or hate it, with a nearly even dichotomy between 5 star and 1 star reviews. The app has received 2,794 reviews. 1,179 players gave it 5 stars, 885 gave it one star and the 4 to 2-star ratings were divided evenly with a mean of 2.33. Historically, this balance of high and low ratings persists from the game’s introduction. Of all months’ the game was offered, December 2013 yielded the most reviews, with 48 5-star reviews, 7 4-star, 3-4 star, 10-2 star and 27 1-star reviews. December was also the month with the largest proportion of 5-star reviews. Through September 2014, the proportion of 5 to 1 star reviews has been even, although the proportion of 1-star reviews has been increasing since December 2013. Since its introduction, the app has experienced in a decline in average rating.

The 27 qualitative English language comments about the game were evaluated. Anecdotally, high ratings praise the game’s ability to provide practice kissing. As one user wrote, “I love it me and my bf [boyfriend] did this then after we had our first ever kiss.” Likewise another user claimed “I’m better” and “Me and my bf done love game so good.” On the other end of the spectrum players complain about the concept entirely, noting “Grose [Gross]”, “I hate it”, “This is a stupid app!!!!!!”. The developer of the app, named Photo Editors and Picture Effects, has 30 other titles on Google Play. None of the other apps are considered games. All their apps are initially free of charge.

5.1.1 Analysis

The love hate dichotomy of affection games is also important. Other games in the affection space, such as Kissing Games [5] share this split. Like Summer Kissing Test, affection games are rarely mediocre in the eyes of players; they are either worthy of high praise or high disdain. As the qualitative feedback indicates, this is often a result of player’s comfort with the game experience. Players seem to either find the concept loveable or detestable.

It is worth noting the decrease in favorable reviews over time. The lower ratings may be the result of lost novelty, as the app itself has changed little in the nearly 1.5 years it was been available. It also may be a result of an experience bias, as new players approach the game with higher expectations. It’s reasonable to expect, that like players of other game types, affection game players come to expect more from affection games

experience, with the minority in the middle. It's also clear that independent developers have bolstered this space, producing the largest set of the most popular titles.

This study may also start to reveal cultural differences between the nations that favor their play. Further research may expose cultural biases toward or against affection play. It's tempting to assume, for example, that cultures that are more commonly affectionate (e.g. kissing as a greeting) are also more apt to play affection games. Yet, it may also prove that games that have explicit taboos against such play inspire players to install such apps as release or revolt to the status quo.

There also remains some unanswered questions which have socio-cultural resonance. How do these games enforce gender and racial stereotypes? Do they afford for play in the same ways that traditional affection games, as recorded by Brian Sutton Smith have done historically?

In short, affection games are ripe for more substantive analysis. It's important to note that a game as simple as Princess Kissing has ranked among the best selling role playing games on mobile devices. This seems to indicate that despite a well established tradition of role playing games, Princess Kissing and similar games are attractive to a large audience. If only for a single day, the fact that more people installed an affection game over a multi-million dollar franchise game indicates some novelty of the genre. At the least, affection games combat the stereotype of digital play as violent play, offering a make love, not war solution set unique to the emerging Affection Game genre.

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