

## Playing with Affections, Digitally

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### Abstract:

Affection games require players to flirt, hug, kiss, or make love to meet their goals. They are games whose core actions are affections. They are bereft of the complex narratives of dating simulations and differentiate themselves via short, situated play. In a society that still aligns digital play with violent play, affection games offer sharp and meaningful contrast. Affection games are the make love, not war experience of a contemporary play. These games afford players the opportunity to kiss their favorite celebrity, flirt their way into hearts, or practice pleasing an intimate partner. As a genre with demonstrable growth between 2010 and 2013, they offer an engaging and growing set of case studies.

### Introduction:

Affections games are a genre loosely defined not by their mechanics, but by their goals. Affection games require players to provide affection to meet in-game goals. These affections are most commonly communicated through four in game verbs: flirt, hug, kiss, and make love. The mechanics of such expression changes somewhat between the games, but the primary game verbs are persistent.

The topic of affection as play has been explored by several researchers as anthropological and sociologic artifact. Most notably, Brian Sutton-Smith studied the games of Ohio youth and affection (1959). Brian Sutton Smiths' analysis provides an important view into the cultural norms, gender roles and social taboos of the day. As with much of his work. Sutton-smith emphasizes the importance of such play as an essential dimension to understanding a society. In short, the things people play and the way they play them say something important about the society from whence the games came.

Fast forward half a century and little has been written about affection games in digitally mediated society. There are of course studies on the expression the games of affection human beings play as part of a our complex social system (Berne 1996). There are also assertions of psycho-social benefits of affectionate play (Bornstein et al., 1999). There are studies on using affection for rehabilitative purposes (McEvoy, Twardosz, & Bishop, 1990). There is mention of everything from socio-economic effects of affection games as zero sum games (Hayden, 2001) to host of analysis of the developmental value of affection play (Bates, Maslin & Frankel 1985 ). Unfortunately there is little discussion of contemporary affectionate play as part of computer and video game play. In particular, while several researchers have asked questions about sex in games (Braithwaite 2006), few have asked questions about affection.

Affectionate play is not new, but the digital simulation of affection is at least as new as human-computer interaction. As such, this paper aims to push the conversation about digital affection games forward. These games have the very specific experience of offering players the opportunity to play with digital affection. This is different than the social simulations offered by dating simulations or popular mainstream games like Larry game series (1987). Affection games provide little context for the affections, jumping directly into the experience of affection itself. Players aren't always given a why for their kissing or hugging, simply that they must do it well. They are also often left to rely on their extrinsic knowledge of good affection to understand how they are performing.

This paper provides several examples of digital Affection games, offering specific case studies for further investigation in this genre. Understanding affection games provides a unique entre into the cultural norms of digital play and its portrayal of affection. The result is fertile ground from which to ask questions about gender roles and cultural norms at the intersection of playful experiences. It also provides an engaging antithesis to violent play, positioning affection as a diametrically opposed other to the violent and aggressive digital play.

## **The Games**

As previously published, affection games are not distributed equally (Grace 2013). Until 2013, the majority of affection games were hosted on websites squarely aimed at girls and young women. With little hyperbole, there is a clear gendered intonation to affection games. When the games existed solely on websites targeting young females, the games were unabashedly feminine. The games aesthetics and language worked to set themselves up in opposition to the male oriented play. They were, in the virtual toy store of the web, on the girls side of the building. They did so by adopting developer names like GirlsGamesGo and using pigtailed teens as their logos. They chose typically “feminine” color pallets, pinks, purples and pastels.

In 2013 there is an apparent migration of many of those web-based games to mobile app retail centers. Because of it’s relatively lax review guidelines, the prime repository for such play is Google Play (Apple arguable forbids much of the play and depiction common to affection games). The migration to Google Play did something interesting. It removed the bifurcation between girls games and boys games. The toy store, as represented by Google Play, is divided not by player demographic, but by genre. Of course, with an estimated 1,000 or fewer affection games in existence, there is no single genre for them in mobile retail markets. Instead, the games are dispersed in categories like casual games, action games, adventure games, and others. With the movement to mobile, affection games were moved from a backroom gendered niche to just another non-gendered game in the giant bargain bin of Android games. This may mean a wider audience for affection games.

The migration from web games to Android is likely the result of technological change and technographic shift. Most notably, Adobe’s Air Flex SDK, which allows Flash developers to migrate their content to the native APK file format required by Google’s Play store. In compliment, casual gaming on mobile devices continues to grow, motivating developers of affection games to move their titles from desktop based play to mobile play.

Since a detailed content analysis of the pre-2013 web-based affection games has already been published (Grace, 2013), this paper focuses on mobile affection games for its case studies. These games largely follow the pattern of its predecessors. As of September 2014, on Google Play there are an estimated 150 kissing games, 10 flirting games, 3 hugging games and 10 games involving some sort of sexual affection as goal. To date, those numbers are a minor subset of the calculated 299 kissing games, 78 flirting games, 4 hugging games and 200 plus sexual affection games in existence.

In part because of the mass migration of formerly Flash based games to native Android applications, many games are the same between desktop and mobile games. With the fluctuation in app availability and the consistent changes in web based games, it is difficult to estimate what percentage of the games being sold as mobile apps originated as web-based games. Some are easily identified because of the

technical artifacts from the conversion (including language indications like clicking a mouse or tapping a key). One such example is Princess Kissing, which is directly derived from a popular web based game called Barbie Kissing.

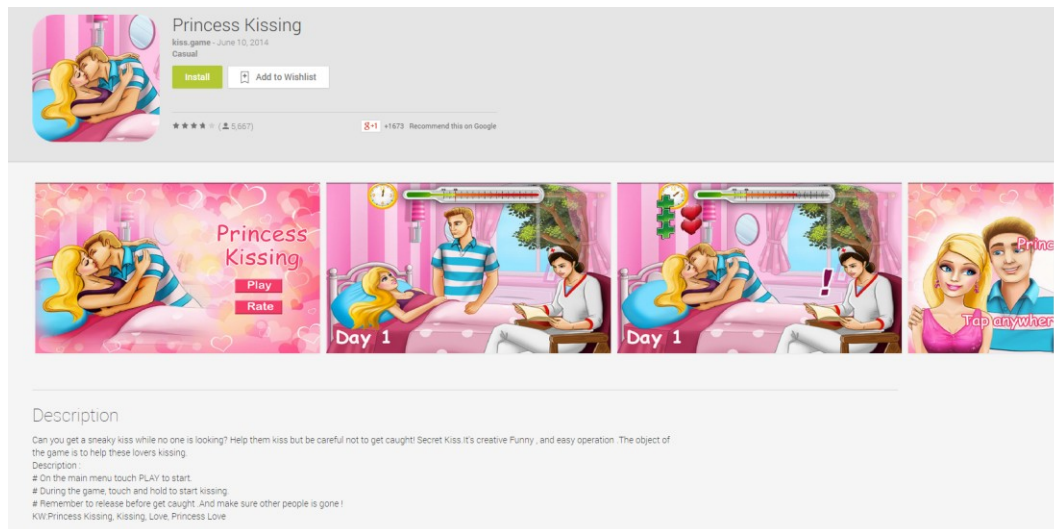


Figure 1. Princess Kissing game

This paper focuses on two of the most popular sub genres within affection games. Ongoing research has identified as many as 6 unique sub genres within Affection Games, identified by a combination of aesthetic and situation choice, context and mechanics. These are fantasy affection games and virtual training affection games.

### **Fantasy Games: Celebrities, Creatures and the Mundane**

While one could argue that all affection games are based in a some form of fantasy, it is useful to unpack the primary fantasies they take as subject. Fantasy in affection games typically includes one of three foci: celebrities, creatures and everyday experiences.

In celebrity fantasy affection games, players or their representation in game, are afforded the ability to lavish their affections on one specific celebrity. The celebrity is often a person of high status in the tween-teen community. They are celebrities associated with the teen fiction of the day, vampire fiction movie stars or band members for example. The most common affection is kissing.

As an example, at it's height, there were 10 celebrity kissing games with Justin Bieber as their subject. The titles of these games were: Kiss Justin Bieber by Rage for Order, Kiss Justin Bieber Kiss Fun by ZipTie Media, Kiss Justin Bieber by ZipTie Media, Kiss Justin Bieber by JiaQing, Kiss Justin Bieber by Jason Foss, Kiss Justin Bieber by Dev Andy, Kiss the Bieb by Pseudonmy Apps, Justin Bieber Kiss by The Mellon Lab, Kiss Justin Bieber by Menzu, Kiss Bieber by Evocative Games.

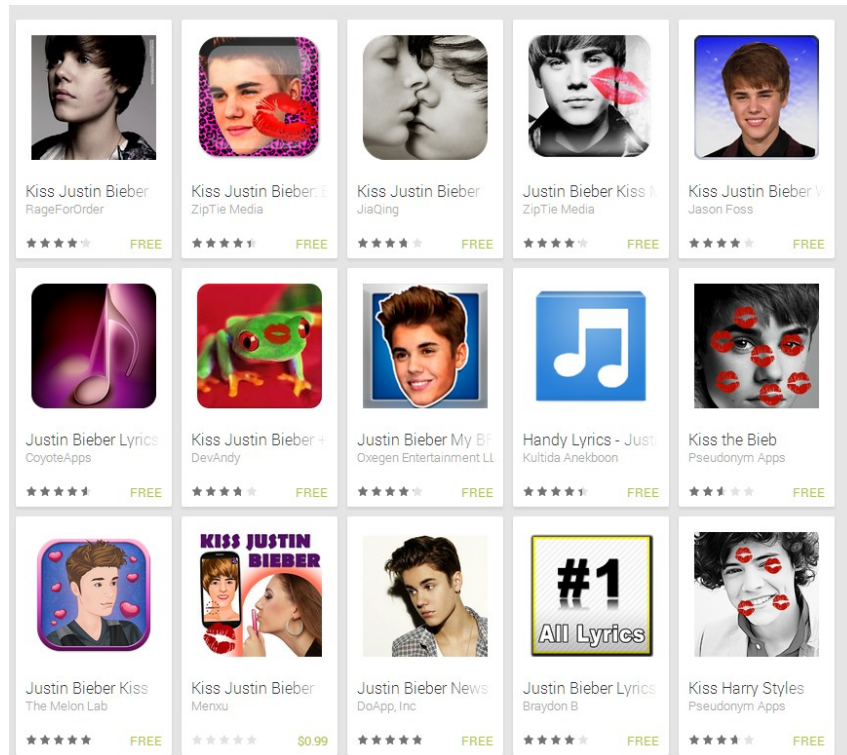


Figure 2. Justin Bieber Kissing Games on Google Play circa June 2013

These games each offered the same basic mechanic. Players were given a photograph or illustration of the celebrity. They could then press their lips, or finger, to their mobile device to give kisses. Some games offered scoring, while others simply left lipstick smears on the virtual window. The games are extraordinarily simple, and many were farcical. Other celebrities to have their names associated with affection games on Google Play include Zack Effron and Edward Styles.

It is clear that the majority of these celebrity games are not officially licensed. Some celebrity fantasy games use the celebrity's name as click bait, luring unsuspecting or fantasy driven players toward a game which is very loosely associated with the player. Britney Spears Kissing (Kissing Games), for example, depicts the player as a hair dresser who sneaks kisses to a somewhat anonymous blonde women in a chair. The game does little to reinforce the notion that the person being kissed is Britney Spears.

Barbie Kissing (Witch Hut), is likewise loosely associated with its subject. Importantly Barbie Kissing was ported from Witch Hut's original Adobe Flash game to an android version by a Kiss.Games (Princess Kissing, 2014), a one app developer on Google Play. For a limited time, as shown in the figure below, the game was advertised as both Barbie Kissing and Princess Kissing.

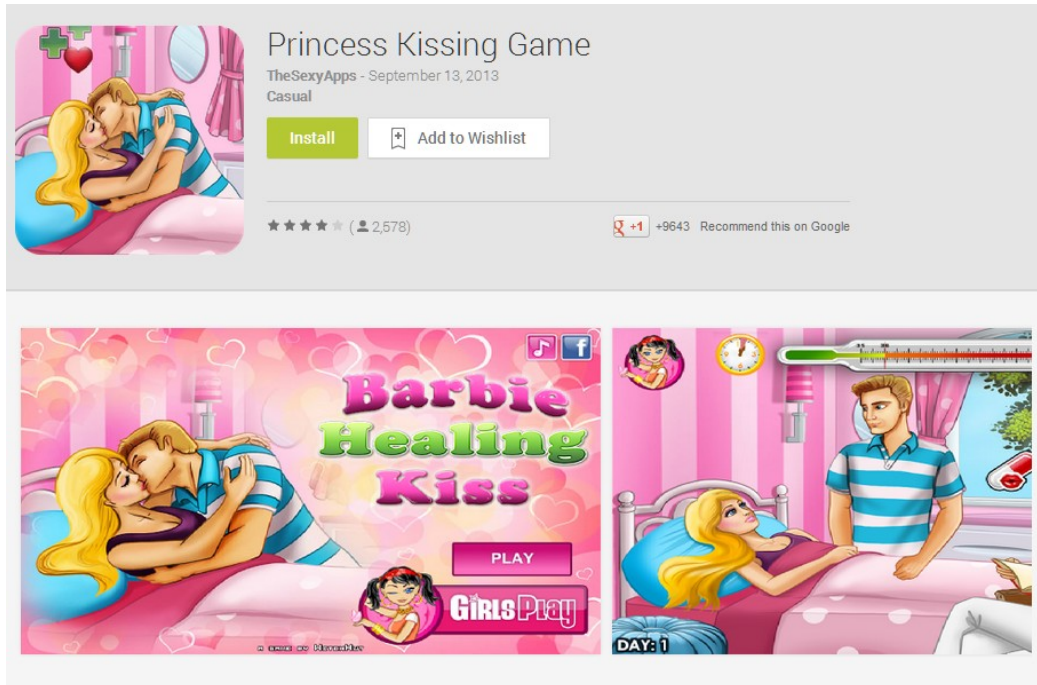


Figure 3. Copyright infringement, port of web game “Barbie Kissing” as originally published on Google Play

The illegitimate use of celebrity names and faces as well as an illegal use of copywritten properties are common in affection games. This is perhaps one of the dark sides of affection play. Despite the clear effort to keep things sweet, such games are somewhat predatory. They are not shy about using click bait and are often quick to clone or downright copy existing games. Such behavior is not new to games, as the same could be said of the early years of Arcade Games, where clones of Pong and Breakout abounded in the industry (Wolf 2008). It is however, a hint that affection games are not the sweet and innocent environment one might expect.

### **Creature Fantasy Games**

Creature fantasy games are novel in their homogeneity. They almost exclusively depict two creatures from the same mythical or genetic lineage sharing affections. Two unicorns kiss and two cats may kiss, but the two types of creatures never exist in the same game. The fantasy of creature play is generally homogenous, affording for no two creatures of different types to express affection. This theme has also been communicated in previously published literature, from which it is clear that diversity is rarely a characteristic of affection games.

Of note in this creature fantasy genre is a game that is arguably not an affection game at all. Unicorn Makeout Mania (Software Soft 2013) is an affection game crossed with a traditional fighter. In short the player characters are two amorous unicorns who must use their tongues and lips to make out to the death. Each level is a death match between players. The game does fall within the general definition of affection game, but it clearly represents a very different tone. What’s particularly noteworthy is that the game was created recently, perhaps indicating the rise of affection-styled games into mixed genres.

Creature fantasy also offers one way affection. Players can Kiss a Panda (RageforOrder 2012) for example. However, these opportunities are often designed as prizes for other game activities or as simple toys, lacking an end state, sense of progression or change in challenge.

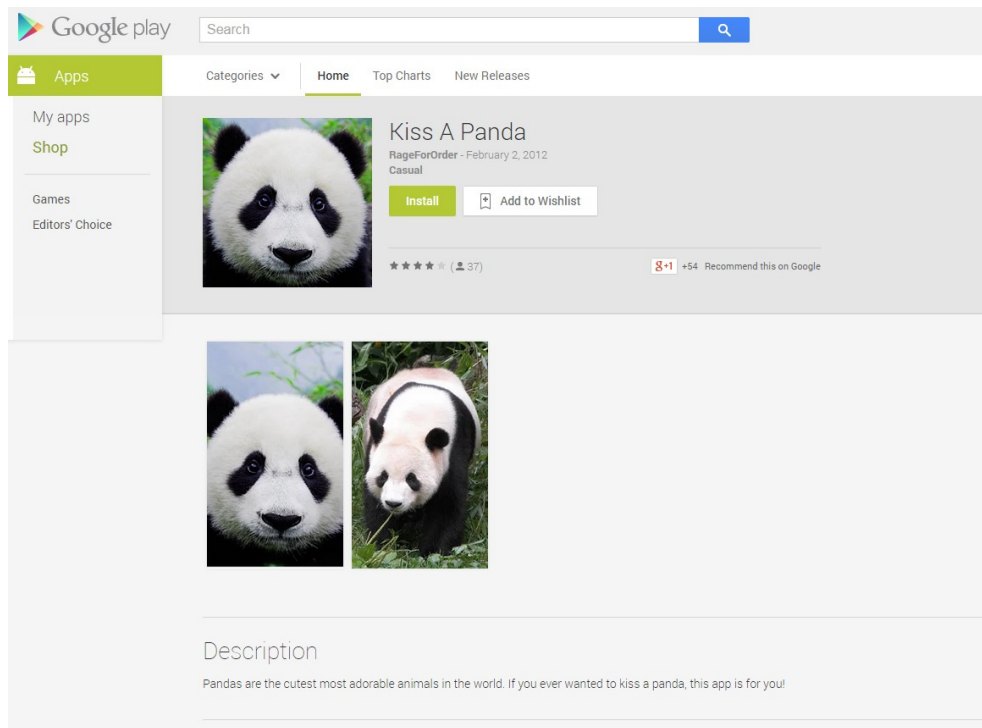


Figure 4. Kiss a Panda, a creature fantasy game

At the other end of the spectrum are everyday fantasy games. Everyday fantasy takes the celebrity or mythical creature out of the equation, but substitutes with mainly public display of affection challenges. Players are tasked with kissing in a variety of mundane environments offer little novelty. Players are tasked with kissing on benches, school desks, office desks, on ferries, under bridges, on dams, etc. These mundane fantasies offer their players something else. They offer the players the opportunity to imagine themselves in the situation. Unlike the fantastic scenarios of either celebrities or mythical creatures, players can easily substitute themselves in these scenarios. More interestingly many of these mundane fantasy focus on generic spaces, which in their abstract, could be anywhere. There are few architectural cues, for example in the environment. Kissing in such games looks the same, whether in Paris, France or Paris, Texas.

A good example of this sub genre, is First Kisses (DS Effects 2013). The game provides players with the conventional kiss and evade mechanic, where players must get as much kissing in with an authority noticing the kiss. The levels of the game only really vary by environment. The environments are still fairly mundane, a bedroom, a classroom, or park bench.





Figure 5. First Kisses.

### Virtual Training Affection Games

The basic formula for virtual training affection games is that the player must practice their affection, digitally mediated and scored. This is often done by kissing a mobile device's screen or less experientially by completing a profile or mixing elements virtual. The virtual training games focusing on affection, are often more similar to toys than games.

The experientially training games share character with the love testers of the previous century. Players perform, are given a score, and can replay ad infinitum until they feel they have perfected the art. The purported advantage is a kind of clinical diagnosis by the computer. The lure in marketing such games is the ability to practice before the affection really counts. The tools offer feedback and try to suggest they will help the player improve, particularly at romantic affections.

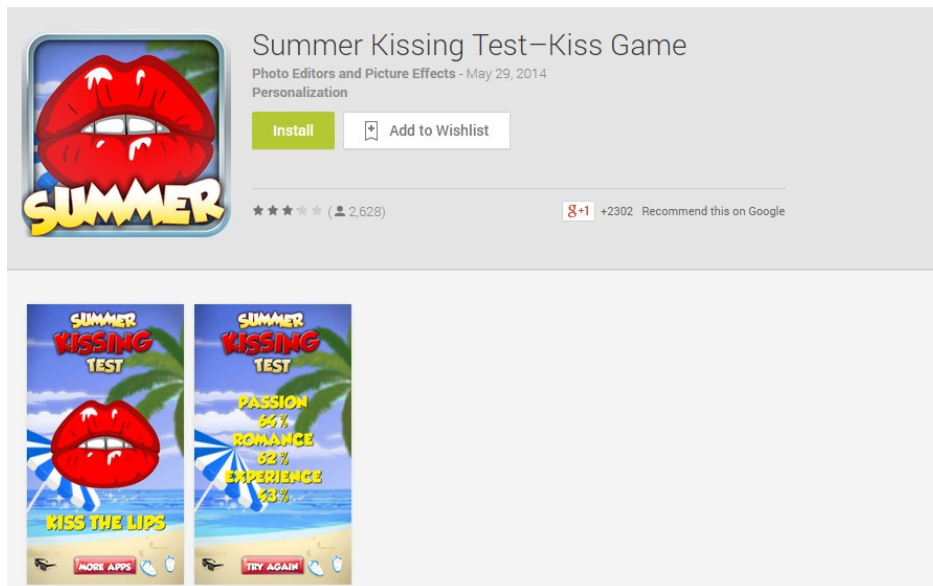


Figure 6. Summer Kissing Test on Google Play

The summer kiss game is emblematic of the experientially affection training game.

The second category of virtual affection training is similar to magazine quizzes that help people rate their love life or understand how they can be a better lover. Both type of training have at least a 50 year precedent, making such play relatively mundane at the surface. However, the novelty for these games is no in their design, but in their communication. The ways in which such games help you become better at affection are novel. They are often an interpreted set of standards from published books or random feedback generators.

Of note in these games, is a Give a Kiss - School Seduction (Examobile 2014), which provides general kiss scoring, but also critiques. Interestingly, it emphasized in its description that it is “a gay and lesbian friendly app.” It’s tempting to ask if love testers of the previous century had to make such declarations, or if it was clear that generally speaking, mobile devices are without gender.

## **Conclusion**

This brief paper was compiled merely to provide simple case studies in the relatively unexplored space of affection games. A future detailed content analysis will demonstrate how some of the affection games are only marginally affection based.. It is also important to note that this analysis was conducted from the United States in English. It is reasonable to understand that regional marketing differences afford for varied results in affection games. There may be for example, Japanese Pop Star celebrity affection games that are not marketed to US consumers and are subsequently not listed for US-based Google Play searches.

Affection games are quickly evolving and fairly short-lived, making research challenging. However, their fly by night character is receding to more involved mainstay affection games. This is arguably a sign of a maturing medium, as the get rich quick gimmicks are pushed aside for more substantive play.



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