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Subverting the Conventions of Affection Games in the Digital Wild

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Abstract

This project combines the art practice of critical gameplay with affection games. The author's Critical Gameplay practice works to challenge the conventions of traditional gameplay by offering alternative ways to play. The 10 critical gameplay games have been exhibited and awarded on 3 continents. Affection games are commercial games that require players to flirt, hug, kiss or make love to meet their goals. Almost every digital affection game offered in commercial spaces feature heteronormative, non-diverse experiences.

Stolen Kisses was created as part of the Critical Gameplay art practice, to subvert affection game standards in the commercial space. The game requires players to kiss their devices to play. It features 7 unique characters who each like to be kissed a different way. Players must press their lips to their touch device balancing kiss duration and frequency to score the most points. The game was developed as an experiment in subverting the experience of affection games by providing a wider range of gender and racial identities. It functions as a kind of intervention in traditional mobile spaces, extending critical design practice into the community of casual mobile game players.

The game has been made freely available on Google Play and averages 50-100 daily downloads. The game attracted the most interest from English speaking players in the United States, the United Kingdom and speakers of Indonesian, Russian and Arabic. This sharply contrasts the demographics of dating simulation players.

Introduction

As the world of games evolves, there is an obvious space for growth among the softer elements of human interaction. While games have successfully designed, refined and iterated on the most basic verbs, such as shooting, collecting, bouncing and driving they have not had as rich a lexicon in affection. Affection games represent an evolution in games toward the complex interplay of love and expression of love [1]. Little research has been done in affection games, particularly in digital entertainment.

Affectionate play offers several pro-social opportunities. If it is proven that violent digital games increase aggressive tendencies in players [2], then affection games may be proven to foster affectionate, pro-social behaviors. Affection games may also serve as consolation for players [3]. Such games can offer an alternate kind of vicarious release for those seeking hard to come by affection. Such games might also serve to help clinically bridge gaps for autistic players or those for which affection is not a natural action

Stolen Kisses

Stolen Kisses is a art-game created to experiment with affection games in the real world mobile environment. It was created as a mix of traditional field research and art expression. The game was implemented to obtain more details about who plays such games and to experiment with alternative affection games. In short, it is critical design as offered by Dunne and Raby [4], applied to a game and released among commercial work. The work stands as a kind of intervention in the tradition of culture jamming made famous by the Barbie Liberation Organization [5] or popular social activist work by the Yes Men [6]. The critical game, Stolen Kisses, is inserted on the digital shelves of mobile marketers and left to be discovered by an unassuming customer.

As an example of this practice, the artist's first effort in such work was a game called Bikini Zombies day at the Beach for Apple iOS and Android Devices (cite). In that game, players were offered an ostensibly typical top-down shooter in which players killed bikini clad zombies. Closer inspection of the game unveiled a variety of sexual content placed somewhat sub-liminaly in the form of image and porn-derived audio.

Stolen Kisses aims to work toward a more pro-social end by meeting two objectives. First it aims to remind the player that play is experimentation, by offering a variety of subjects with which to play. Second, it is designed to produce research on affection game players in much the way traditional mobile games track, recorded and demography their players. Practically speaking, researching affection games is particularly troublesome. Players are not always eager to admit that they play such games. Likewise obtaining statistics from developers is difficult because many developers are independent game makers with few resources. The affection games that are made by larger companies are also held as intellectual property that developers are not eager to share (for fear of competition). As such, creating a simple affection game provides a reasonable opportunity to research affection games in the real world.

After studying the affection games genre it was clear that several characteristics plagued the space. In particular, the games demonstrated very little racial or gender diversity. Stolen Kisses was designed to test the international market for a game that offered increased racial and gender diversity. The simple game was developed and released by the artists-researcher on October 25, 2013. The game, as listed on Google Play in 2015 is shown in figure 1.
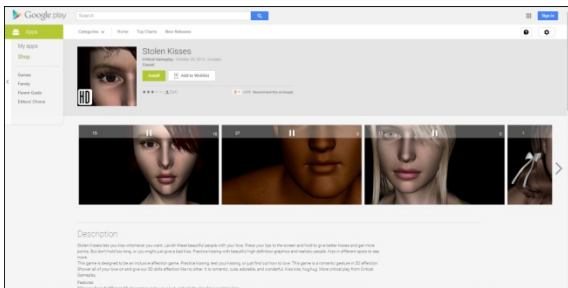

Fig 1. *Stolen Kisses*, 2015,Lindsay Grace, digital game .apk, Copyright owned by Lindsay Grace.

Stolen Kisses is a digitally communicated affection game using the kiss verb. Players must choose one of 8 racially and gender diverse characters. The player then has 90 seconds per round to kiss the character to gain points by putting their lips to a touch screen. The player must balance their kisses between long kisses and short kisses. Kisses that are long earn more points, until they hit a dynamic too-long threshold where they lose all points accrued during that kiss. Each of the characters varies in their desire for long and short kisses. The player is rewarded for interpreting the feedback via points earned for each character.

App Annie independent app tracking was used to record activity for the game. 24,608 installs of the game were recorded between October 24, 2013 and June 1, 2015. Figure 2 demonstrates the daily installation rate for the game. As shown, the game consistently attracted an average of 60-70 installs daily. The game was most installed by players based in the United States (26%), Indonesia (6.2%), the Philippines (4.6%), Russia (3.4%) and Turkey (3.4%).
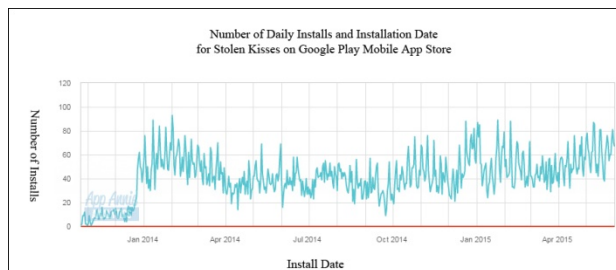

Fig 2. *Stolen Kisses download statistics*, 2015, (anon), digital game .apk, Copyright owned by author.

From recorded statistics, players primarily spoke United States English (54%) and British English (9.51%), as the game was not translated into other languages. However, 4.91% of the players spoke Indonesian, 3.99% spoke Russian, 3.68% spoke Arabic, and 2.45% spoke German. In comparison, comparable casual games have a distribution that is 26.6% United States English, 7.61% British English, 5.97% Russian, 5.27% Spanish and 5.63% Brazilian Portuguese. The Stolen Kisses game was played disproportionally by English, Indonesian, and Arabic speakers. 15% of the players could not be attributed to a specific language.

The 244 players who reviewed the game provided an average score of 3 out of 5. Online complaints largely focused on the game's mechanics, while praise focused on the experience (kissing the mobile device). The game is admittedly a fairly low quality experience, but it did serve the research goal by providing an opportunity to understand more about the players of such games with minimal development investment.

Case Study Findings

The Stolen Kisses game serves as a simple experiment in affection games. It's release allowed the researchers to understand a bit more about who is playing this type of affection game around the world. These findings include the fact that many people in the English speaking world are interested in affection games and that such affection is somewhat cross-cultural. Players from Spanish and Portuguese speaking cultures were also disproportionally disinterested in installing the game.

The game was developed in the United States which may explain some of the majority player base. In hindsight, failing to translate the game may have also prevented wider distribution and interest in the game. It is important to note that the game was never marketed; it was simple published and left to attract interest on its own merit. Ultimately, many factors effect why people install specific games, including graphics, promotional material, title and a host of other marketing decisions. Since Stolen Kisses is very simple it seems inappropriate to infer too much from the install numbers. It seems sufficient to infer that it's mode of play is of cross-cultural interest for mobile users, with a clearly strong interest by the English speaking world.

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