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## Digital affection games: Cultural lens and critical reflection

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**A**ffection games are a unique genre that requires players to flirt, hug, kiss or make love to meet their objectives. In a world that has an increasing number of human–computer-mediated interactions, affection games are a sociological novelty worth investigating. Affection games share more thematic and structural elements with adolescent play such as kissing games than they do with the traditional human computer interaction to which digital games are normally associated. Affection games have been studied by noted play theorist Brian Sutton Smith (1959) and anthropologists for decades, yet this new space of digital affection games has been the subject of very little research. Affection games represent an important departure from the simulation and computer graphics history often ascribed to digital games (Uriccho 2005).

It is easy to misunderstand affection games as a version of role-play or dating simulation. Affection games employ four key game verbs: flirting, hugging, kissing and sexual expression. Both dating simulation and role-playing games (RPGs) use a wider set of game verbs for which flirting, hugging, kissing or making love are secondary acts. Hugs and kisses in a typical dating

simulation are earned affections. A player is rewarded with the ability to kiss after appropriately courting a non-player character. A typical dating simulation requires players to navigate the complexities of a relationship with a variety of game verbs which may include joking, complimenting, purchasing, comforting, wooing and more.

In contrast, affection games place affection as the primary action in the game. Affection games involve interactions focused on one or more affections, whereas simulations are rich environments that emulate the complexity of the real world. A dating simulation does just as it states – it attempts to simulate. Affection games are much simpler. Digital affection games have more to do with a round of Spin the Bottle than a year of mating ritual.

The more than 1,000 recognized digital affection games are provided as web-based or mobile casual games. They are not designed for use on game consoles and they have rarely been considered for an arcade. Ostensibly they are marketed for young girls and women, as they abound on websites such as [girlgames.com](http://girlgames.com). They are small games with social features that are limited to sharing scores and commenting on their game experience.

This chapter provides an overview of the affection games genre, providing data about the design and implementation of such games. In particular, it examines the ways in which these casual games have been implemented and how they can be interpreted. In short, they stand both as record of a distinct affection fantasy purveyed through play and as an opportunity for critical reflection on cultural norms and values depicted in games. The goal of this writing is to provide a topographical overview of affection games which helps to explain their mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek 2004). Such study should inform game studies, game design and researchers seeking to understand how these unique games work.

Although affection games are largely constructed for simple entertainment, their designs demonstrate a unique and important departure from traditional digital games. This departure may be a harbinger for new modes of play among wider demographics. They may also be an indication of an emerging, social-emotional play modality. It is also reasonable to understand them as a temporary cultural oddity preceding an evolution of alternative play.

At the very least, affection games offer an interesting counterpoint to the many critics of video game violence. Such games resound as a kind of antithesis, championing hugs and kisses, instead of bullets and swords. Problems in these games are solved with affection. Affection games are more about spreading love than spreading blood.

## The multiple histories of affection games

No history of affection games has been written. Instead, historical trajectories help illuminate the path that delivered the modern digital affection game. The clearest of these historical paths mirrors the growth of post-industrial-revolution leisure society. In some ways, the carnival midway (Brouws and Caron 2001) is the progenitor of affection games between humans and non-humans. In such environments, kissing booths and love testers were as common as feats of strength. These predecessors to arcade games were once commonplace among the dating culture of the midway (Kent 2001). The mechanical love tester eventually gave way to the mechanical pinball machines and digital arcade, becoming an almost forgettable artefact of the evolution of arcades (Kent 2001). Love testing and its related play moved to the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the form of quizzes that rate prowess, adventurousness and related attributes. These leisure activities were later substituted by web-based quizzes, evolving into the flash-based affection games which preceded the contemporary mobile affection game.

An alternative history places affection games more recently. This alternate history originates on the pages of racy pulp fiction and harlequin novels. As disposable medium, ripe with sexual fantasy, the covers of these stories promised more than their relatively tame internal pages delivered. Pulp fiction characters found their way into digital games for personal computers. The most notable of these was the progenitor of the successful franchise of *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra Online 1987). Online System's *Softporn Adventure* (1981), which provides the foundation for the later *Leisure Suit Larry Series*, provided the player with one goal – to earn the affections of several women. Each of the successive games offered a more comical take on the pulp fiction predecessors. Admittedly, Larry did less worrying about affectionate expression than meeting carnal needs as conquest. Larry did, however, validate such play by making it mainstream. The sexually explicit content of more underground titles for personal computers also provide subsequent developers legitimate examples to emulate. Such games include *Interlude, the Ultimate Experience* (Hogan 1981), a self-described game for the Apple II and TRS-80 computers users released in 1979. The game interviewed players and subsequently provided them with stimulating scenarios for fictive or real sexy scenarios.

Importantly, this lineage of affection games was never ported to the arcade. They shared the same experience as today's affection game, an at-home, somewhat personal experience. The fundamental problem with this second

history is that it can be argued that this is more clearly the history of dating simulations than affection games.

Yet a third historical origin can be understood in the varied affection games of varied cultures. Affection games have been the subject of some anthropological study, of which Brian Sutton Smith is most noteworthy (1959). Sutton Smith's study of affection games and plays helped frame cultural understanding in varied communities. However, their jump to digital experiences is harder to link, other than to note that some types of analog play are converted to digital play as a matter of convenience or marketing. The pre-digital affection games are commonly played in familiar groups allowing players to negotiate the bounds of play. This third origin explains some of the cultural demand for digital affection games, but does not clearly link the evolution from non-digital to digital.

These histories do demonstrate the duplicity of affection games. Where one history posits a very public and competitive affection, the other demonstrates the private, personal experience of affection games. One trajectory views affection as declarative, demonstrative and quantifiable (i.e. a score). The other is a personal, at-home adventure to be experienced in private. These are characteristics of the contemporary affection game. Players experience their games personally, with some allowing personalization, and all supporting the somewhat private playing afforded by mobile and web play. An e-sports tournament of affection games is an unlikely event.

It can be theorized that affection games may indicate a desire for computer games to fill the space once occupied by daily interactions with people: the human-computer interaction substitutes for the human-human interaction. Contemporary media has voiced this theory of affection space between human-computer interactions, making it the centrepiece of the Hollywood film *Her* (Jonze 2013) and flirting with this tension via varied science fiction plots such as Spielberg's *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Whether the product of growing affections towards the digital tools with which we interact daily or the indication of some human-human void needing to be mediated by computers, affection games are trending upwards. In March 2013 there were roughly forty affection games available on the Google Play app marketplace. By March 2014 there are more than 200 on that same marketplace.

## Understanding affection games

The shorthand definition for digital affection games is that they require players to flirt, hug, kiss or commit sexual acts to meet their goals. In 2013 the author conducted a detailed study of affection games on the web, followed by a

similar analysis in 2014 of affection games for mobile devices. The following section highlights those findings to provide context for the subsequent review of the genre.

There are more than 1,000 games for which affection is a primary thematic or mechanical focus. The largest group of these are of a sexual nature, offered primarily on pornographic repositories or within clearinghouses for dating simulation. The spaces where these games are offered are not stable. Websites shut unexpectedly, games are added and removed without notice. Likewise, the Google Play Store discontinues such games and developers sometimes neglect their listings. Providing exact numbers on affection games is particularly tricky because the games are rarely made by large-scale publishers.

A large-scale analysis of the popular websites and app marketplaces was conducted to understand the catalogue of affection games. The app descriptions and self-reported genres were parsed from the Apple App Store, Google Play, Kongregate and New Grounds. The games were also played and subject to a content analysis. To get a more specialized view, the genre-specific websites GamesforGirlsClub.com, KissingGames.com and SexGamesFun.com were also included in the analysis. User profile data from Quantcast.com indicates that GameforGirlsCLub.com and KissingGames.com are dominated by female users, while the remaining sites were gender neutral or male-dominated. Both Kongregate.com and SexGamesFun.com have male-dominated user populations.

In 2013 the social gaming site Kongregate offered 211 affection games; 198 were kissing games, nine were flirting games and four were hugging games. Kongregate does not allow games with sexual content. NewGrounds.com offered ninety-four affection games; seventy-six of the games required sexual expression, fourteen kissing, three hugging and one flirting. Other affection game distributions for the sites are listed in Table 7.1.

For mobile games, the number of affections games available on Google Play far exceeds the games available for Apple iOS devices. Neither Google Play nor Apple iOS allow for sexually explicit content. Occasionally such content does sneak through filters, but the games do not last long before they are flagged and removed. As such, sexual expression in mobile games cannot be examined accurately through either of these mobile marketplaces.

As shown in Table 7.2, by April 2014, Google Play had 234 affection games. Apple had thirty-eight. There are two factors that contribute to this difference. First, Apple's application review process is more stringent and critical. Second, many of the games on Google Play are conversions of Flash games that were already popular on the web. In some cases, these Android ports are not officially licensed by their original developer.

**Table 7.1** Web affection games by primary focus

	Kongregate. com	New Grounds. com	Games forGirlsClub. com	Kissing Games. com	SexGames Fun.com
<b>Flirt</b>	9	1	80	0	9
<b>Hug</b>	4	3	0	0	0
<b>Kiss</b>	198	14	250	96	1
<b>Sexual expression</b>	0	76	0	0	850

**Table 7.2** Mobile affection games

	Google Play	Apple App Store
<b>Flirt</b>	7	3
<b>Hug</b>	7	2
<b>Kiss</b>	220	33

Affection games sales and distribution are not reported by the leading statisticians in the industry (e.g. NPD Group). As a genre, affection games are relatively small set of total mobile game sales. It is, however, important to note popular affection games achieve millions of plays. Popular games such as *Kiss Baby* (JiaQing 2013) on Google Play achieved more than 1,500 average daily downloads in a single day over its one-year history. Games in the web space record more than 1,800 comments and boast higher daily play rates than their mobile equivalents.

## Categorizing affection games

To understand affection games it is useful to use a few simple categorizations. The primary dichotomy is between intra-game affection and extra-game affection. Intra-game affections are wholly contained within the game's digital world. In these games a player presses a button, taps a screen or other common

action to initiate an affection inside the game-world. The acts of affection are typically between two or more digital surrogates within the game-world. Intra-game affection is most often between player character and non-player characters. *School Flirting Game* (Girls Go Games 2009) and *Princess Kissing Game* (TheSexyApps 2014) demonstrate a typical intra-game affection.

Intra-game affections are more common than extra-game affections. Extra-game affections require players to commit an act of affection from outside the game-world to affect the in-game world. Common actions include players kissing a touch screen (Critical Gameplay 2013) or players hugging a stuffed toy (Critical Gameplay 2012). The four game verbs within the affection genre also serve as a good way to categorize the games. Therefore, affection games can be labelled as hugging games, flirting games, kissing games and games involving sexual affection. Each of these labels can be further clarified by intra- or extra-game-player expression. As demonstrated by the number produced, it is clear that kissing games are the most common mainstream affection game.

### ***Kissing games***

The two most common kissing game formats are intra-game sneaking kisses and extra game kiss testers. Of all the kissing games, sneaking kisses is the most common. The scenario is typically two characters who want to kiss, but are hindered by some outside force. Players must sneak kisses when the boss isn't looking in *Office Love Kiss* (MugaGames 2014), the mall security guard looks away (GirlGoGames 2008) or while the birds and bees are distracted in *Will You Marry Me* (Slix Media 2010). Kissing in these games is overwhelmingly romantic and heteronormative (Grace 2013). Even when non-human characters are involved, affection is between a blue unicorn and a pink one in *Unicorn Miracle* (Spil Games 2013) or a jewellery-adorned smaller pink kitten and larger, unadorned blue kitten (*My Kitty's Kiss 2* 2009).

Extra-game kissing games are similar to modern kissing booths and kiss testers. Players place their lips on a mobile device and are scored on the quality of the kiss. The game *Kiss Tester* (2014) is a typical example of such play. As a sub-genre, the kiss tester is in itself dichotomous. The games are either romantic, emphasizing a sensuous kiss or adoring, emphasizing a quantity of kisses. *Stolen Kisses* (Critical Gameplay 2013) is a good example of the sensuous kiss, while *Baby Kissing* (JiaQing 2013) emphasizes the adoring kiss.

No other affection game type has this tension between sensuousness and adoration. No other affection game type has this large a population of extra-game interactions either. The range of kissing games is likely a result of a larger audience. As the largest non-pornographic of affection game genre, kissing have the most diverse play.



## ***Sexual expression games***

Sexual expression games are the most diverse in content, depiction, style and theme. They are arguably the largest group of affection games, although defining sexual affection is problematic. Many of the games focus on heightening the non-player character's pleasure. Games such as *A Really Great Night* (Sangwiched 2007) demonstrate the simplest side of sexual affection games. A more sardonic example can be found in Molleindustria's game *Orgasm Simulator*, designed to help women practice faking orgasm (2004). The games vary from highly graphic to relatively abstracted. They also range from the literal to the more expressive.

Clearly, not all that is sexual is affectionate. There are more than 800 games whose focus is sexual acts. With more than 800 sexual affection games on mobile devices and the web, it is admittedly inappropriate to skip their analysis. It is also important to understand that sexual affection is difficult to study in games. Depiction of sexual activity is complicated by cultural encoding and framing. Censorship and the abstract borders of pornography, make formal analysis even more complicated. For this reason it is tempting, although not particularly academic, to gloss over sex as an act of affection and a subset of the affection games domain.

It is important to understand that much like the pornographic film industry, which may produce many films of varying quality and content, sex games run the gamut from extremely amateur productions to well-funded enterprises. The cultural reference for some of these games is Anime- and Manga-informed. Others are whimsical and sophomoric. Discerning the affection play from within the wide range of sex games is simply too large for the scope of this topographical analysis. The topic is also loaded with cultural complexities that require expansive cross-cultural subject matter experts.

It is also important to note that when these games are provided through pornographic venues, many of them conflate physical and mental violence. In the worst of these games, non-player characters are held at gunpoint and made to do sexual acts. In such games, which represent a kind of rape fantasy, there is no affection. Yet, a close reading or well-played session with such games does provide complication in the definition of affectionate act. Such games may end in a pleased non-player character and hints that the scenario may have been part of a mutually agreed fantasy role-play (e.g. a fuzzy handcuffs scenario).

From the author's perspective, these are largely not affection games. These are violent games full of enactment of deplorable acts. Yet, from another cultural lens these games may be less objectionable than the public display of romantic affection to another culture. As such, the topic of sexual expression

in affection games must be considered carefully. The specific borders for this space vary enough between cultures that their definition would require an additional chapter in the least. It is sufficient to define sexual affection games as games in which sexual acts are explicitly referenced through image or player action and for which affection is the communicated motivation for such acts.

### ***Flirting games***

Flirting games are typically about collecting admirers. In these games score is kept by attracting the most people. The games work similarly to shooting games, where players must flirt with the right type of non-player character to win. If a player flirts with the wrong kind of person, typically a geeky male or person of the same sex, they lose points (Girls Go Games 2009).

In the hundreds of affection games reviewed, no game in which extra-game flirting occurs was found. It is also worth noting that while a flirt is a fairly nuanced activity, most flirting games are quite the opposite. Non-player characters are effectively zapped by the alluring wiles of the player character and fall listlessly under the player's control. The games also do not depict a volley between flirterers, but instead align flirting with a game of tag. Once a flirt is cast, its spell is only broken by failing to continue to flirt. This model of flirting provides for interesting fodder in cultural analysis. Flirting games often represent the first step in romantic affection. In the implied narrative of many games, kissing games and sexual expression games are preceded by some initial flirt.

### ***Hugging games***

Hugging games are the rarest of the affection games. They are especially rare as the primary game mechanic. Games such as *Hug the Sloth* (Proletariat 2013) actually have nothing to do with hugging at all. Instead, hugging is often the achieved result of a job well done. In a matching game *Teddy Bears in Love* (Best Games 2 Girls 2012), a player's secondary verb is a hug, which is only available after players align Cupid's arrows appropriately. In web and mobile games, hugs are noticeably absent. Instead, the most prevalent hugging games exist as art installations and design concepts, as in *Big Huggin* (Critical Gamepaly 2012) and *Hugatron* (Spilt Milk Studios 2013).

It can be speculated that hugging does not translate well in the medium, an argument quickly corrected by a review of kissing games. It could also be argued that the hugging rests uncomfortably between the romantic and the non-romantic. A romantic hug is present in the Western tradition of affection, as is the supportive hug, the familial hug and other variations.

Unlike the other affections, hugs do not hold the romantic aspirations of a great kiss or the power of flirting the world under your spell. The first hug has never made its way into memorable movie moments, but the first kiss has. Likewise, few movies climb to climax with an adoring hug. These are of course speculations. In short, there is no clear reason why hugs are so rarely the subject in affection games.

## The cultural lenses of affection games

While there are several perspectives through which affection games can be interpreted, it seems most productive to understand them as a phenomenon of escape and fantasy or as an artefact of play to interpret culture. These games demonstrate specific gender roles and dynamics, perspectives on affection and a cultural mindset about where, how and between whom affection is expressed. These characteristics express themselves in the scenarios and game environments chosen, in the way the games describe themselves and the ways in which they position themselves in relation to other media such as their relationship to film, books and the Internet.

### *Escape and fantasy*

Understanding affection games as fantasy is more complicated than simple escapism. While many games do provide fantastical images of unicorns and hugging teddy bears, the fantasy ends there. The games are often subject to the same real-world pressures. There are authority figures who threaten the instant joy of a kiss. There are people who want to turn the romantic scenarios into a Romeo and Juliet tragedy. It is this dose of external pressure that makes the games compelling and creates their challenge. They are not absolute fantasy, they are real fantasies. They thinly veil the adolescent stresses of conformity, social hierarchy and the desire to convey affection.

This tension is most apparent in the sneak-kiss games. Their settings range from mundane street corners to fantastic spaces. The games themselves are realistically only differentiated by place. *Rainy Big Damn Bridge* (Dressup Games 77 2013) shares the same mechanics with *Kissing on a Ferry* (Girl Games 123 2012) or *Risky Motorcycle Kissing* while it's in motion (DressUp Gal 2012). The fantasy, it seems, is limited to where, not why or how. These are simple situational fantasies. There is little fantasy around who. The escape is the where.

It is also important to note that these are also cliché fantasies, representing a kind of standard. They are shared if not prescribed escapes. Women kiss bad boys on motorcycles, in convertibles or in the stables. The challenge comes from overweight nannies, old crotchety horse owners and bald all-business bosses. The forces that avert these affections are the old guard. They are not peers, they are authority figures who seem to have one aim in their digital lives – to prevent players from scoring. They are never as attractive as the players and never as interesting. They appear when things are getting hottest and disappear once it cools.

Interestingly, even when these antagonist elements are non-human, they are constantly admonishing. The most novel of these is a game called *Will You Marry Me* (Slix Media 2010) in which players need to make sure that birds and frogs do not catch them in a post-proposal embrace. It seems even when the birds and bees are involved, the birds, at least, reign over couples ready to prevent their affections.

But some affection games have a more alarming undertone. *Jennifer Rose Babysitter in Love* (Noname Lab) requires the player to babysit children while still pleasing her boyfriend who interrupts her job. The balancing of boyfriend and baby is not a fantasy at all, but a kind of chore where two non-player characters strive for the player's attention incessantly. It's a small-scale *Diner Dash* with all the challenging feminist conflicts (Chess 2012), which is why it is also beneficial to explore and interpret affection games with a critical lens.

### ***Critical cultural reflection***

The ways a culture chooses to play speaks volumes about its values, anxieties and aspirations. Digital games can be 'a reflection of the cultural imagination' (Nakamura 2013, 55). Just as science fiction film and books reflect contemporary anxieties around technologies or social malaise, games encode such elements through designers and for players. Games are a series of problems, imagined by a designer and solved through the game verbs the designer affords.

From a positive perspective, affection games reflect a desire to provide more affection. If games are considered cathartic release, then such games could be understood as the cathartic release of a society yearning for more affection. If the adolescent expresses their pent-up rage through the repeated destruction of a non-player character in a first person shooter, could it not be asserted that the player of an affection game is putting action to their pent-up desires to flirt, hug, kiss and make love? Ferguson et al. have indicated that catharsis-seeking behaviour is linked to stress and innate traits (2010). In

short, if extended to affection games, players may be seeking such play as stress relief from pent-up desires related to expressing affection. Accordingly, affection games are a reflection of a desire to express, if not participate in, more affection.

On the other end of the spectrum on violent play are the researchers who in summary see a link between what players practice in games and what they demonstrate after playing the game (Griffiths 1999). In studying the effect of violence, they find children who play violent games demonstrate more aggressive free play. From this perspective, when applied to affection instead of violence, players are flirting, kissing, hugging or making love as practice for outside of the game or at the least, for future aspiration towards expressing affection. In short, these players are expressing affection in games to someday unleash this pent-up and practised energy on the outside world. Either view is the logical trajectory of extending the aforementioned fantasy play into a sociocultural reflection.

The games also exist as a kind of cultural reflection of value. The play in these games is not a departure from the conventional world; it is an affirmation of it. This is easily translated as aspirational play. In the same way that children play house or war, the players of affection games are practicing affection. The social rules are explicitly encoded in the games and the players of such games are aspiring to meet those rules. The rules aren't opposed to kissing for example, merely getting caught. Clearly the fun is in playing, but importantly, the anxiety and fear of getting caught is also part of the fun. Without the threat of getting caught, there is no challenge.

The notions of aspirational play are further reinforced by the subjects and situations of many affection games. Where human or anthropomorphized creatures are shown, they are sharing their affections with the best candidates. If it is romantic, the player must flirt only with the popular people (Girl Go Games 2009) or kiss towards the greatest recipe (Zet 2014). The game descriptions even return to the love testers of their origins, helping players practice a great kiss (Zet 2014). The games acknowledge their intersection with the non-game world, even when they are fantasy.

What then does it mean to have a game in which a woman player character is always tending to the baby she must care for and the boyfriend who wants nothing but to kiss her? Such games can be read as reflective or prescriptive. They replicate a real-world tension that plays itself out in households daily. But the game also prescribes a limited number of solutions. Players cannot break this cycle. The boyfriend does not bother to help. He only concerns himself with his own needs, while the player character is constantly bound to this unsustainable balancing act (*Jennifer Rose: Babysitter in Love 2*).

Such games then cease to remain mere reflection; they become a kind of practice. This type of productive play, where gender roles are reflected and enforced through incessantly taking care of others, is the heart of Chess's understanding of the gender divide in play (2009). From this perspective, players are not enjoying cathartic release, but instead practicing as training for a future or present. The key questions then become how much of the world of such affection games is imagined, how much of it is affirming existing roles and how much of it feeds a cycle of affirmation that limits the imagined.

## Conclusion

Affection games are a growing genre within the diversifying landscape of digital play. These games remain a relatively niche experience, as none of the major game developers have embraced the genre. Independent developers, prone to taking design risks and experimentation have been at the heart of affection game growth. Affection games do provide an engaging view into gender and fantasy from the safe space of play. They also provide a counterpoint to the violent play stereotype that many non-players attribute to games. They are of course full of their own complications and cause for alarm, but their growth seems to indicate either a shift in demographic or a shift in player desires. It is particularly interesting as a new form of human-computer interaction which has its history in the behind closed doors of human-human interactions.

There are several common affectionate acts that are not typically offered in affection games. These include the hand holding, common to some African cultures as well as the Western tradition, and bowing. While it is not clear why such affections are not common to the affection games genre, it's reasonable to recognize that such affections may not offer the high impact experience and visual clarity that kissing or making love may offer.

While the communication of affection varies widely around the world, affection games are largely unified in their depictions. They typically emulate the romantic and sexual affections demonstrated in popular Western media. Their focus is whimsical flirts, friendly hugs, moonlit kisses and passionate sex. They are rarely critical of these acts, instead affirming the sociocultural standards. It is this lack of critical distance that provides new game designers with a clear inroad to new pro-social play. The relative dearth of research into affection games also affords game scholars an opportunity to understand an arguably unique-to-games genre. At the very least, affection games represent a divergence from the simulation era of games to one that is more squarely focused on affection as a solution.

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