

“I’m an entrepreneur. ‘Ambitious’ is my middle name.”

-Kim Kardashian

## **Abstract**

This article examines the simultaneously acclaimed and vilified mobile celebrity game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood (KK:H)*. Through an analysis of popular discourse about the game in dialogue with its play experience, this article showcases the ways in which this scrutiny is tied to value judgements about celebrity culture, affective labour, and emerging monetization strategies in games. By exploring the game’s content, mechanics, and economics, I argue that *KK:H*’s mixed reception is a product of how these make visible celebrity labour and the work of self-branding, intimacy, and engagement in the attentional economy of social media. Through its form and functioning, this game reveals the intensities of women’s work in low status activities, across play and celebrity culture, and through this, challenges their devaluation. It is via this simulation of invisible labour, I argue, that *KK:H* represents an exemplar of what new ludic economies can indicate about the future of digital play.

## **Keywords**

Celebrity, simulation, women’s work, authenticity, affective labour, monetization, self-branding

## **Introduction**

At the end of 2014, a surprising entry appeared on a number of Game of the Year lists. That game was *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood (KK:H)*, a re-skinned version of the less popular title *Stardom: Hollywood* released by developer Glu Games, which brands itself as “The Leader in 3D Freemium Mobile Gaming”. In this high-profile example of a mobile celebrity game, the player begins as a shop clerk and, upon being discovered by real-life superstar Kim Kardashian, works their way up from the unknowns of the E-List to the fame of the A-List by gaining as many fans as possible. Fans are accrued through a range of in-game activities, including attendance at parties to promote products, photo shoots, modeling gigs, and other work contracts across the globe. *KK:H* represents a major popular culture phenomenon (the Kardashian family brand) extending its social media and spotlight savvy from television, fashion, Twitter, and Instagram into the mobile game design realm with immensely profitable results. This free-to-play game has been tremendously successful; it was downloaded 40 million times in 2015 and in-app purchasing led to \$71.8 million in sales in that same year (Robehmed 2016). It has also garnered acclaim as “genius” by venues such as *The Atlantic* (Garber 2014).

Such popularity and praise, however, has been accompanied by scathing critiques regarding the ethics of this game’s mechanics for eliciting in-game purchases, its materialistic missions, its shallow storyline, and its repetitive design. Indeed, while *KK:H* is but the most profitable in a growing genre of celebrity games including titles by American pop stars Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, and Demi Lovato, it has received a disproportionate amount of critical media attention. This includes not only reports of its profitability, but also think pieces appearing in *The New Inquiry* (Malsky 2015) and

*Brooklyn Magazine* (Curry 2014) interrogating in particular the game's simulation of women's invisible and undervalued emotional labour. The public attention on this game is unique because up until fairly recently serious consideration of the content, mechanics, and economics of these kinds of titles has been scant in digital games reporting as well as within the scholarship.

Within academic research the focus on girls' and women's play has been frequently limited to either the characterization of games targeted at female audiences as stereotypical and stereotyping of feminine interests (Kafai 1996) or of gaming as a platform on which they face experiences of harassment and marginalization (Cross 2014; Salter & Blodgett 2012). The past decade of research in the field has focused on documenting the myriad ways in which digital play can exclude or marginalize women and girls, from representation and design to culture and community to production and marketing, what Fron et. al (2007) refer to as the hegemony of play. Such work has been central to revealing and documenting the range of ways in which digital games act as technologies of gender (Royse et. al 2007) serving to perpetuate narrow masculinist values and behaviours at the expense of diverse perspectives, approaches, and interests.

One important intervention in the recent "feminists in games" project is the serious and critical scholarly investigation of the cultural objects designed for, targeted at, and played by feminine audiences. Recently there has been a growing emphasis on interventionist work seeking not only the identification but also the redress of inequitable cultural, industrial, and institutional systems to create the structural conditions for inclusion in

digital games (Jenson & de Castell 2013). One element of this project is the focus on not only the play of masculinized games by women but also consideration of the games developed for female audiences. This entails critical engagement with feminized games not only to analyze how they act as technologies of gender essentialization through their palettes, stories, and mechanics (De Castell & Bryson 1998), but to explore how as simulations they construct new and emerging cultural imaginaries that tell us about gendered relationships between women and time (Chess 2016) and material and immaterial labour (Anable 2013). This paper represents one such examination, of the simultaneously scrutinized and celebrated game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood (KK:H)*. Here, I explore the underlying values informing the above-noted celebrations and criticisms of *KK:H*, about celebrity culture, affective labour in play, and monetization of engagement with games through an analysis of popular discourse about the game as well as its play experience.

This paper examines three aspects of the game- content (celebrity culture), economics (free-to-play with in-game purchases), and mechanics (affective engagement)- to understand how the game's functioning links to its popular reception. These elements are investigated based on news media coverage of this game from its release in June 2014 to August 2016 as well as play of the game over the same time period. The analysis is organized according to the play structure of *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, which is an exemplar of a new genre of games called Invest/Express. In this type of game, play is premised on player customization and personalization of the game world (the Express element) through successful management of time both within and outside this game

world, as well as strategic investment of attentional and financial capital (the Invest element). *KK:H* is an ideal object study because of how it simultaneously encapsulates skepticism and denigration of feminine leisure and work in both digital games culture and celebrity culture within its reception and play. As I will show, this is because in its form and functioning, *KK:H* makes visible the labour underlying celebrity and its spreading practices of self-branding, intimacy work, and hyper-visibility in the attentional economy, making it impossible to ignore the intensity of women's work therein. It therefore reveals the labour that sustains low status activities- both feminine play and celebrity practices- and challenges their devaluation.

Through this analysis, I contribute to the growing area of research on casual games and women's participation in games culture by considering the specific and unique entanglement of ludic economies, affect, and engagement. By tracing the relationship between play experience and discourse about *KK:H*, I indicate the ways in which a simple dismissal of games targeted at women can miss the significance of what Shira Chess (2016) refers to as the increasing feminization of this media form, and its implications for the future of both digital play and work.

### **Express Yourself: Simulating Fame, Celebrity, and Self-Promotion in *KK:H***

Within *KK:H*, a star is born but a celebrity is discovered, supporting the notion that celebrity is a product of interaction rather than identity in the Internet era (Marwick, 2015a). In this game, your talent as an actor, model, and myriad other roles is assumed, but recognition by designated others through a specific set of practices is required to

validate your star status. In this section, I consider the processes embedded within the possibilities of play in this game to understand its “procedural rhetoric” and therefore the meaning conveyed within the rules of play therein (Bogost, 2008). *KK:H* models a particular world, infusing meaning into play through its rule sets and the dynamics between player-subject and system they enable. Research on casual, mobile, and social games has indicated that the processes embedded within these games tends to emphasize the simulation of capitalistic values from agricultural cultivation in *FarmVille* (Mäyrä 2015) to entrepreneurial work in *Diner Dash* (Chess 2012) to property accumulation in *Animal Crossing* (Bogost 2008). As games within these genres become more popular and entrenched within everyday life, it becomes essential to consider not only that they simulate productivity in our leisure time, but how this is procedurally inscribed within different games.

In the case of games premised on time and social management, including *Invest/Express* titles, this is often linked to affective labour, a significant design element considering that these games are intended for (presumed if not actual) female audiences of player-subjects. While the player-subject is a construct of the game’s design as well as paratextual elements such as advertising rather than an essential truth about a game’s audience, it is important to consider the boundaries and possibilities offered to the imagined player, and the meaning of these constraints and opportunities. In this analysis of *KK:H*, these affordances and their significance are explored based on 24 months of play of the game, as well as content analysis of 70 articles published about the title from its release to the end of Summer 2016.

As per the Express element of the genre, within *KK:H* the player begins by engaging with the “Kustomization” options available to the male or female avatar in the game, “your star”. You can select from a limited range of facial features, skin tones, hair styles, and basic outfit options. Once you have customized your nascent star in the game, you begin as a nobody on the E-List, a poor, unknown shop clerk at the So Chic Boutique. You are tasked with folding clothing and closing up the shop for the night. Your lucky break comes after you leave your low-paying job for the day and encounter Kim Kardashian herself in the street. She is having a fashion emergency, and asks you to step in and help her with a dress. The game presents you with a few options for response, drawing your attention immediately to the fact that your interactions with characters in the game can have repercussions in the sense of positive or negative media coverage via the in-game social media tracking your progress to fame. In *KK:H*, the media are always watching, ready to pass a judgment that will lead to increased or lost fans. Regardless, your destiny in the game is set- once you have helped Kim select the dress in the most flattering color, you become her protégé. She arranges your first photo shoot, and from this exposure and the ongoing support of Kim, her “momager” Kris Jenner, and the Kardashian siblings, you find yourself on the celebrity ladder, ready to climb your way up to the A-List.

To play effectively, the player of *KK:H* must understand that all of these actions- folding clothes, assisting Kim, selecting an outfit, traveling to the photo shoot, and posing for the camera- have a cost, be it cash, specialty “K-Stars”, or energy. These are somewhat interchangeable between the game world and the offline world, as you can pay for

additional energy or currency resources with a credit card for instance (a feature I will return to later). All it takes for your innate star to enter into the state of becoming a celebrity is to wait patiently for your energy to renew so that you may complete a task that will generate more fans and money. As Chess (2016) has noted in her analysis of Invest/Express games, the dynamic between the player-subject and the game is one of push and pull- you will expend your limited energy before you are able to complete a time-delimited task, and so you will need to leave the game for a time before you must return to finish your modeling gig, public appearance, or date prior to time running out for this task.

As the game progresses with more quests that are dependent on your own actions rather than the support of Kim, it becomes clear that what the game simulates as the path to celebrity is first and foremost work. Play in this game is about working up your way to celebrity, which functions in a manner resembling the corporate ladder, a hierarchy beginning with the entry level advancing to the highest level. Work starts in the boutique where Kim Kardashian discovers you, and then onwards to making appearances, modeling, acting in TV commercials, reality TV, and films, posing as spokesperson for brands and causes, managing businesses including shops and clubs, bartending, travel writing, and dabbling in interior design, to name a few instantiations of the game's simulation of gig labour. Work will take you to an ever-growing set of global destinations from Malibu to Miami to Punta Mita. Through these activities, as well as dating other celebrities and engaging in visible acquisition of clothing, accessories, homes, decorations, cars, pets, and children, you gain fans. In other words, your avatar - like Kim



Kardashian herself - rises to fame by building a successful brand via engagement in an ever-expanding and global range of promotional and licensing activities as well as conspicuous consumption. Selling the self via personal branding is the route to celebrity success, and it is framed in this game as a wholly meritocratic process.

As this indicates, the variant of immaterial work simulated within this game is of self-branding labour, sometimes paid, sometimes not. Even where tasks are compensated, such as appearances and photo shoots, you are required to make an outlay to ensure your success, in terms of travel costs and upgraded outfits and accessories. In addition to this, your entrepreneurial self-promotion within *KK:H* is greatly enhanced, as many of the game's non-player characters such as your manager will tell you, by regularly going on dates in bars and restaurants. Dating functions in precisely the same fashion as paid gigs- you devote energy in this case to flirting, buying drinks, and dancing rather than posing, changing outfits, and networking. You are similarly rewarded for adopting a pet or baby and tending to it diligently. The results across these activities are also identical- the ever-present and watching media will report positively or negatively on your professional activity, canoodling, and caring activities depending on how effectively you navigate the push and pull of your energy depletion and renewal, which impacts on your fan base and therefore your status on whatever list you appear.

In this way, *KK:H* functions as a perfect simulation of celebrity as a product of (increasingly social) media-savvy activities. The measures of success are the same as those of celebrity on social media, with quantitative metrics of likes and followers.

Through these mechanics, the player-subject learns that all life in the game- from the romantic to the parental to the professional- is part of the climb from entrepreneurial micro-celebrity to bona fide A-List celebrity. To successfully make this transition entails drawing on the judgmental gaze of media surveillance to command the fleeting favor of followers in the attention economy (Marwick, 2015a). Effective self-representation and the ability to circulate that representation across the necessary media platforms becomes the fundamental element of fame, and within *KK:H*, as in the social media sites Marwick analyzes, it is those who draw on conventional markers of status in the digital realm- a digitally-rendered sports car or luxury SUV, 2-D Karl Lagerfeld shoes, cartoonish Balmain coats- that will most successfully gain media and fan attention.

Through this emphasis on self-branding, *KK:H* simulates not only contemporary feminized celebrity but also the functioning of promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) wherein branding and marketing become suffuse across culture for publicizing not only consumer products but immaterial goods across social life, leading to the commodification of subjectivity. Celebrity is the ultimate expression of the self as a branded good, but this has also become commonplace across everyday life with social media metrics of engagement such as likes functioning as a form of currency in the neoliberal and precarious attention economy. However, attention unlike other forms of currency cannot accumulate but only dissipate, entailing ongoing labour to sustain, a mechanic perfectly simulated by *KK:H* as an Invest/Express game. *KK:H* illuminates the relationship between free social media engagement and self-branding through the networked platform of the game application itself, showcasing how in contemporary

culture, increasingly rationalistic and instrumental play becomes indistinct from work (Silverman & Simon, 2009).

This is clearly gendered, as indicated by the exclusively feminine celebrities drawing on games as a means of extending their social media branding. Indeed, the entrepreneurial self within *KK:H* is distinctly postfeminist as well as neoliberal (Holmes & Negra, 2011). As the progression to fame along a meritocratic ladder format indicates, the player-subject engages in a game world where every avatar, regardless of gender or race, is free from barriers to success, achievable through hard in-game work. Chess (2016) notes that games within the Invest/Express genre such as *KK:H* de-emphasize the social elements associated with Social Networking Games and through the increased functioning upon time rather than networks mirrors gendered patterns of leisure. I would argue that in addition to this, the disappearance of the social in this genre emphasizes individuality in the process of attainment and mobility, dependent on the dedication of the subject to use any social connections to solely advance themselves rather than communities or coalitions.

As a game oriented towards female audiences, *KK:H* mirrors trends in broader culture emphasizing the importance of cultivating a unique individual style for dissemination across networked media. This is central to the Express mechanic of the genre. While the popular rhetoric of new media is that this provides freedom from previous corporeal limitations, the apparent freedoms of code are disciplined as forcefully by beauty standards as in offline quarters. As Morrison (2016) notes in her analysis of online spaces

for avatar creation popular with teen girls, the customization of avatars is laden with normative assumptions about gendered self-representation- “even within a symbolic economy in a virtual space, dominant discourses assign power to notions of idealized beauty and brand loyalty” (p.244). The player-subject of *KK:H* is constantly told they have a unique look, despite the fact that one’s options for customizing your body shape, physical abilities, and age are non-existent. The individual creativity a player can express is limited to eye color, face shape, hair style, and clothing from a heavily branded selection of options. As this indicates, there are numerous design barriers to wide expression, highlighting how narrow the acceptable definitions of individuality, uniqueness, and creativity are in this cultural context. One’s avatar subscribes by necessity to a narrow Western ideal of attractiveness, extending the terrain of cultural representations that enforce such norms, highlighting the limitations of personalization and customization implied within the Express emphasis of the genre.

At the same time, within *KK:H* one of the key differences between your entrepreneurial celebrity in the game and that of the game’s namesake is the de-centering of the physical body. Beauty is the default in this game, and the player does not need to engage in exercise, cosmetic surgery, or dieting to maintain it. In *KK:H* your avatar never sleeps. You eat and drink only as part of the rituals of dating, and energy is distilled down to a time-linked currency akin to a wage rather than a physical need. The idealized identity of the clean digital world promises players the opportunity to escape the mess of corporeality and its imperfections, trading them in for the stratifications of digital consumer culture and the celebrity ladder. The in-game, avatarial body is fixed as an

always-perfect computational entity, with a battery that drains and must be recharged, and it is instead the player body that is disciplined, instructed to leave and return according to in-game time limitations. In this way you immediately possess all the traits required to obtain fame- conventional beauty, a fit body, work in cool industries, ability to acquire luxury goods- thereby enabling a level playing field on which to climb the celebrity ladder (Marwick 2015b). This simulation of celebrity work is highly sanitized to accord with Kim Kardashian's own recalibration of her image away from the sexual public persona from which she started (Sastre 2014). Within *KK:H* you will never have the opportunity (or pressure) to produce a sex tape, as your body's power is stripped of association with gender, sexuality, race, and all corporeal stratifications to become the perfect exemplar of constant labour transcending structural oppressions, while at the same time framing work as play.

Thus far my analysis has focused on the mechanics of *KK:H*, and in particular the implications of Express element of the genre. In the next section, I consider the links between this and the dynamic it structures with the player-subject, considering in particular their relationship to affective and monetary interaction, or the Invest focus of the genre.

### **Invest in Yourself: The Pain and Pleasure of Affective Ludic Engagement**

I am at the airport with my mother, getting ready to say goodbye for another six months as I make my way back to my job on the other side of the ocean after the holidays. She

offers to buy me a coffee before I go through security, so I sit with the luggage and look at my phone. I see a star-shaping symbol indicating a push notification from *KK:H*, and I know that my energy in the game is now adequately replenished that I may complete the task I started a few hours earlier. As I consider opening up the application, my mother returns and asks without irony, “Is Kim calling?”

This autobiographical note highlights important dimensions of the play of *KK:H*, particularly the affective elements of the game. Push notifications are a standard feature of many applications, but they play a unique role when a game is so strongly associated with a person-as-brand. Within this game, these are thematically consistent with the ways in which you are addressed affectively by Kim in particular. Your efforts are constantly validated by her avatar, and when disappointments occur she will console you. Indeed, the pleasures of having this celebrity emotionally support your progress is one of the few un-quantified rewards of the game.



(Figure 1: Kim Kardashian’s affective engagement with your avatar- in this quest she validates your clothes-folding savvy early in the game. However, this emotional support characterizes your interactions throughout the game, regardless of the difficulty of the task)

From a strategic viewpoint, mobilizing Kim's face, name, and voice for encouraging engagement with the game app is an effective strategy in the attention economy where intimacy with a celebrity is highly valued (Marwick & boyd 2011). As the player of the game, you are addressed directly and with familiarity by Kardashian, invited to parties, appearances, and on ski trips, and recruited to the resolution of problems such as that of a lost beloved piece of jewelry. The centering of a personal dynamic between your avatar and the Kardashian sisters as well as matriarch Kris Jenner allows for the creation of an affective, parasocial relationship that lends a sense of authenticity to this celebrity endorsement. The play of this game on the mobile device enhances the simulation of the intimacy of face-to-face conversation discussed as part of the parasocial relationship between performers and fans (Horton & Wohl 1956). For example, to promote special events, a video of Kim Kardashian's non-avatar self occasionally appears speaking directly to the player. When she calls you, it is Kim's voice rather than an actor you will hear, enhancing the perception of immediacy, intimacy, and unbrokered access to celebrity. As Genz (2015) notes in her analysis of postfeminist celebrity culture, this suggestion of closeness and access as a form of authenticity functions as a marketing strategy encouraging engagement with the brand. Through the game, Kardashian extends her performance of intimacy, already honed through reality television and social media use, to include a constant cycle of communication and affective interaction with the player-subject. Engagement is both core to celebrity self-branding tactics and to the Invest/Express gaming genre, which is partly why the celebrity skinning of these titles is effective. In this way, *KK:H* is exemplary of the tendency in mobile, casual, and social

games to emphasize engagement over immersion, which is an element of the backlash from “core” gamers against these less seemingly “legitimate” forms of gaming (Vanderhoef 2013).

Intimate affective engagement motivates the Invest feature of *KK:H*, but it is as much a source of punitive feedback as it is positive reinforcement. Should you ignore your push notifications to complete a work or data task in time, you will be on the receiving end of disparaging media comments about your performance. And if you opt to take a break from the game (perhaps because you are tired of Kim calling during family reunions), upon your return you will be greeted with in-game star reporter Ray Powers wondering about your disappearance on social media, with a commensurate drop in fan numbers. Disappointment and disapproval are as much a part of the game’s affective landscape as encouragement and praise, and these are the ways that *KK:H* disciplines your time investment in the game. However, the Invest element of the game is not only tied to affective economies related to time, but also to three interchangeable forms of currency within the game. These are energy, cash, and K-stars, and they are convertible both within the game world but also through forms of “real-world” capital, both financial and attentional.

As with all ludic economies, scarcity is a key principle in the digital economy of *KK:H*. Structural barriers to achievement are not linked to racism or sexism in this virtual world, but to the depletion of your set amount of energy at any given point. As noted above, the push and pull mechanic of this game is related to the renewal and exhaustion of the key



currency of energy. Your energy will deplete with any given task, and you then have to wait for the energy to renew to continue whatever job you are completing at a rate of one energy every 5 minutes. The fundamental challenge in Invest/Express games is that tasks are time-limited, so you can run out of time before you accrue enough energy to get 5 stars on an event. You must therefore leave the game but return within a set period to successfully progress, a mode of play that the player quickly learns can conflict with periods of non-connectivity, during commuting for instance, or other time-based commitments, such as meetings. The player-subject is thus presumed to have flexible temporalities related to work and leisure in this genre's functionalities.

The same principle applies to other forms of currency, which accrue slowly through gameplay. Cash is awarded for completing tasks in increasing abundance, while K-Stars are the deluxe and rare currency of the game, which you can amass through gameplay very slowly. You can earn the former in sufficient quantities to save up for cash-based Express design elements such as clothes, but the latter are impossible to gather in large quantities simply throughout gameplay. This is significant because acquisition within the game is essential. You will be asked in play to acquire particular items, such as specific virtual boots or handbags, that require more of this currency than you would be able to collect in non-paid play. Their purchase is not essential to play but certainly speeds up the process of gaining fans and moving towards the upper echelons of celebrity. Thus, while it is entirely possible to make it to the A-List slowly without spending any extra money, as Curry (2014) notes, the game is vastly improved in experience should you pay extra money for the elusive and exclusive K-Stars, as this allows for you to skip the grinding

entailed in non-paid play. Certainly, this pursuit of greater enjoyment is reflected in the tremendous economic success of the game, which is free to download and play, and yet profits from massive microtransaction-based sales. This purchasing model is neither unique to mobile games nor game apps, but is worth scrutinizing critically in games in terms of how this form of monetization translates into the mechanics and dynamics of the game- its rules, objectives, and overall progression.

Within *KK:H*, there are many in-game encouragements and solicitations for the expenditure of offline currency, where players are encouraged to click on cash, K-Star, and energy packs from the Starshop (bundled deals that also variously include bonuses in the form of ad-free play and VIP daily rewards). In-game purchasing seamlessly links to one's credit card information on Google Play or App Store, allowing you to gain quantities of in-game currency that would take a great deal of time to collect for very low prices. There are also alternative modes of earning additional currency in the game, including by watching video advertisements, interacting with third parties through surveys and other click-based activities, or downloading and interacting with other apps.

The accumulation of these in-game currencies is not incidental to play but fundamental to the pursuit of fans. Free play, even if you participate in the sale of your eyeballs through the above-mentioned alternative income streams, is insufficient should you wish to acquire the most exclusive in-game Express items, such as luxury housing, sports cars, or the adoption of babies and pets. As this indicates, the Invest element of this genre is tied to a mixed ludic economy of time and capital, which results in a unique class politics of

the microtransaction. While the disappearance of the social networking element of the game would seem to limit this to a closed-world hierarchy, the game includes special promotional events allowing for comparison and competition with other *KK:H* players, such as fashion contests, which reaffirms the value of rare, expensive, and difficult-to-attain in-game items and the resemblance of virtual social status and cultural capital to those familiar in offline (micro)celebrity culture. In this way, the egalitarianism of the game noted above in terms of the game's Express feature (where your starting point includes a conventionally attractive look and an innate quality allowing you to be talent-spotted by Kardashian), is belied by the aspirational element of the Invest characteristics of the game. These mechanics reinforce a hierarchy of fame linked to class and socio-economic status through required attainment of elite designer goods and access to exclusive venues.

As this indicates, celebrity intimacy and affective engagement are embedded in *KK:H*'s dynamics to encourage players to convert to paying customers, a trend Ramirez (2015) observes in other mobile freemium games. Thus the mechanics, dynamics, and modes of engagement entailed within Invest/Express games stratify players through their ludic economies, creating their own variants of freeloaders playing with found in-game resources (clicking on fire hydrants and street signs will reward you with one or two dollars) and big-spending digital whales (Phillips 2015) bypassing the hard work implied in the celebrity meritocracy discussed in the previous section. Through these affective pressures to increase your investment, Kim Kardashian's entry into mobile game design represents the successful extension of commodification of the celebrity self within virtual

worlds, creating new modes of profit in the attention economy. But it is important to note that this is not only facilitated by the expansion of celebrity culture, but also by shifts in the conceptual and practical boundaries between finance and play (Goggin 2012), wherein affective engagement becomes both work (Invest) and reward (Express).

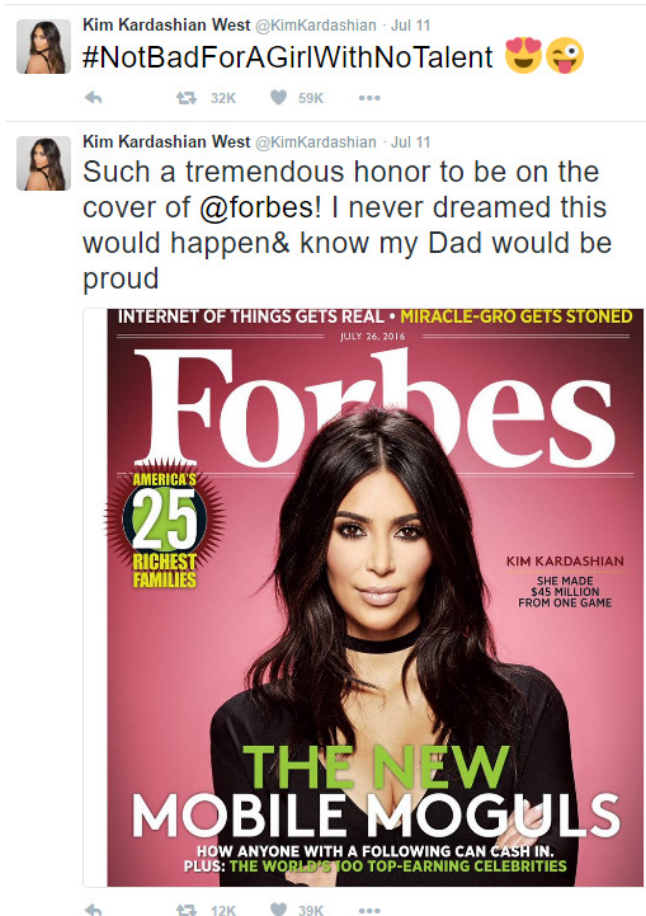
This analysis has focused on the internal functioning of this game, considering the interplay of ludic pleasure, economies, and celebrity culture within the virtual world of *KK:H*. In what follows I consider how these elements are received more broadly as a cultural object in mainstream and games culture to understand how these shifts in game design and play are interpreted and valued.

### **Invest/Express: Authenticity, Visibility, and the Pitfalls of Affective Play**

Within *KK:H*, expression and investment as mechanics are motivated by the embedded notion that celebrity is constantly performed and cultivated through one's personal branding activities, a "practice involves ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona" (Marwick & boyd 2011, 140). The mechanics of the game indeed mirror Kardashian's own celebrity performances, as we have seen with the emphasis on a unique look, her affective engagement with the player-subject, and the orientation towards fan metrics as the measure of success. But the most contentious element of this celebrity simulation is that of authenticity, a topic of tremendous debate around celebrity and digital games alike. Indeed, given the use of social and new media for celebrity performances of authenticity (Keller 2012), *KK:H* represents an ideal opportunity to consider the

relationship between games, celebrity, authenticity, and success in both game content and discourse about the title and its eponymous celebrity.

The critical reception of *KK:H* as noted above was mixed, with media attention focusing on the immense profits reaped by Kardashian in her foray into mobile gaming. However, despite astonishment about how this game captured the interest and wallets of players, the response to this game in the mainstream media has been heavily critical. Garber's (2014) designation of the game as "genius" in *The Atlantic* is made in awe but not admiration. Kardashian has "laughed all the way to the bank" as predicted by Garber, using "the ATM mirror to reapply her mascara" and indeed making the cover of *Forbes* along the way (see Figure 2 and 3 below), but her game has been thoroughly disparaged. For instance, author Ayelet Waldman decried the game as "vile" and "pure evil", a characterization eagerly shared across venues such as *Gawker*, *Time*, and *Business Insider*. These critiques are interesting because they have not been levied to the same extent at other mobile or freemium games, which is why Curry (2014) argues that this scorn cannot be disentangled from criticism of Kardashian herself, for being famous for being famous, or famous for nothing.



(Figure 2: Kim Kardashian tweets her Forbes cover as well as a response to her critics regarding her lack of talent, simultaneously promoting her game triumphs while humorously countering the discourse of undeserving celebrity)



(Figure 3: Kim Kardashian responds again to her critics with ironic humor and easily legible metrics of success. This claims regarding *KK:H* profits were subsequently critiqued as exaggeration)

This is exemplified by but not limited to Kim Kardashian, as female celebrities tend to be much scrutinized for their fame. This critical surveillance is frequently related to doubts about the value of giving fame to those who are seen as undeserving- famous for reasons over than achievement or ability. This critical gaze has been theorized as gendered; female celebrity bodies are the constant object of disciplinary scrutiny related to their authenticity, challenged should they appear “contrived”, “artificial” “phony” (Allen 2011, 150), as well as “trying too hard” and ““not being themselves”” (151). Authenticity work and performed intimacy across reality television and new media can intensify these judgments. Indeed, there appears to be a relationship between degrees of visibility and volume of scorn. I would argue that this is partly because, as with the simulation of celebrity ascension in *KK:H*, these modes of performance reveal the new, often hidden forms of labour within this domain, highlighting the contours of the delegitimized work that underlies the performance of “worklessness” in contemporary celebrity (Wood, Kay & Banks 2017). This uncovering of women’s work can violate expectations related to the fantasy of celebrity held in contemporary culture, recalibrating and at times challenging the “structure of feeling” we attribute to these mediated realities (Wood & Skeggs 2011).

While the above-mentioned studies have focused on how these contradictions occur through social media use on Twitter and Instagram as well as on reality television programming, what this analysis of *KK:H* indicates is that the format of digital gaming most clearly elucidates the intensity of invisible forms of labour. As the news media discourse around the game highlights, Kardashian is famous because she has successfully

capitalized on self-branding across new business models and platforms, exploiting ludic economies as her latest venture. These efforts become clear in the gameplay expected of the player-subject within her mobile game. This type of labour, however, is vilified because it is feminine emotional labour- smiling, looking pretty, and being charming, welcoming, and accommodating. Postfeminist femininity requires extensive glamour labour (Wissinger 2015), but this is only valued if it is not seen. *KK:H* reveals many of the realities of this labour for contemporary celebrity (hustling, non-stop work, fashion, and dating) while masking others (constant beauty rituals, fitness and dieting, cosmetic surgery and enhancement). As this demonstrates, authenticity is situated within the body, and the individual is at the center of the celebratory neoliberal discourse, with self-improvement framed as the mechanism by which to reveal one's authentic self. However, while this is expected, making such labour visible is still taboo. Celebrity, both in and out of the game, is what results from being paid for women's work, an unveiling of previously invisible labour that is discomforting to those who must now see it.

In digital culture, this aligns with parallel challenges related to women's visibility. For instance, as Reagle (2015) notes in his discussion of the "fake geek girl" discourse, women are framed as receiving undue attention based on their erotic capital, including sexual attractiveness, beauty, and social skills, a trend identical to the disdain held for contemporary female celebrities. Indeed, this emphasis on legitimacy is striking because it is so thoroughly familiar within games culture, where women's participation is also evaluated for its authenticity in a cultural economy of attention. While in celebrity culture there is affective conflict related to real bodies, real celebrity, and real talent, in games



culture we may observe a cultural backlash related to real games, real games, and real gameplay (Vanderhoef 2013). These disputes coalesce around *KK:H*, a game that indicates how the framing of women's activity within culture, including within games, as but passive consumption belies a range of affective, immaterial forms of labour (Anable 2013).

Tremendous effort in both celebrity and games culture realms is dedicated to discussing and debating the legitimacy of women's leisure, participation, visibility, and labour. We can understand this scorn, disbelief, and doubt as premised on the fundamental notion that women are pretenders to the realm of production, wrongfully appropriating space, time, and capital from more deserving, talented individuals. Part of this is due to the pressure to keep invisible the labour entailed in progressing in celebrity culture, where "a great deal of effort goes into [...] blurring the divisions between work and leisure while generating publicity, and between the constructed and the spontaneous in the outcomes" (Turner, Bonner and Marshall 2006, 770). What must be naturalized and hidden in postfeminist media culture is a complex constellation of affective labour, represented within the activities of *KK:H* as well as in the onscreen life of her namesake. This includes the emotional labour of constructing intimacy with fans and followers, the glamour labour of managing a stylish appearance on- and offline, the playbour of working virtually in and through a digital game, and, on top of this, constant authenticity work.

Despite its success, *KK:H* remains a low-status object, no matter its celebrity endorsement, astronomical sales, or relatively high production values. Through this, it stands in tension with the postfeminist vision of advancement, where women face no barriers to reaching the top should they work hard enough, demonstrating the flaws of its own procedural rhetoric through its cultural reception. This is particularly problematic given that when women do make their way into the masculine dominated industry of game design, they tend to be pushed into designing “games for women” (Styhre, Remneland-Wikhamn, Szczepanska, & Ljungberg 2016), a process that perpetuates the symbolic association of women with passive or casual consumption in the domain of digital play.

## **Conclusions**

*Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* as an exemplar of the celebrity, casual, mobile, and Invest/Express genres shows us that Chess’s (2016) observations about the feminization of video games is prescient. It is a misreading however to understand this as another example of the oft-observed denigration of women’s leisure and participation, amplified through the inclusion of celebrity thematics. Rather, it is a telling example of what these trends can indicate about the future of digital games, where the ludic economies of their distribution and sale align perfectly with their internal mechanics of constant affective labour, ceaseless productivity, and engagement with capital across new spatial and temporal flows. It highlights in particular the tensions of visibility related to these shifts in feminized ludic economies.

Such tendencies and conflicts indicate the increasing importance of a wide range of interdisciplinary engagements with the changing terrain of gaming. *KK:H* is a mobile digital game but it is also a cultural object entwining a range of issues in celebrity, social media, and new models of labour, which indicates the necessity of examining games as a significant part of our contemporary mediascape. The collaboration between Glu Games and a range of celebrities indicates an extension of celebrity branding activity into digital games. In addition to the naming of the game and the centering of its missions on the Kardashian brand, *KK:H* becomes a part of the digital media strategy deployed by this reality star franchise in how it extends the affective parasocial relationship between the fan (the player) and the celebrity. In these games, as you learn to work like a contemporary celebrity in a hyper-mediated world, you become simultaneously a consumer of the brand you are emulating. As you aim to increase your social currency within *KK:H* via fans and media approval, Kardashian enjoys the success of her ludic venture and its spectacular effectiveness in engaging the currency of downloads, in-app purchases, and online store comments and ratings. In both the social and the ludic economy, you can never quite keep up with Kardashians.

The procedural rhetoric of *KK:H* is thus tangled with the ways Kardashian is herself deploying digital game app form:

“The similar logics and ideals of post-feminist and neoliberal subjects, including independence, capability, and empowerment, complement the neoliberal cultural space of the web, where individuals are awarded for innovative public

performances through viral circulation, monetary compensation, and perhaps most importantly, celebrity” (Keller 2012, 152).

As players develop their virtual celebrity through self-promotion, pursuit of ever-greater visibility, and control of their public image, Kardashian furthers the commodification of self via her own personal brand through the game. Chess (2016) has compellingly shown how games in the Invest/Express genre like *KK:H* are designed to occupy the piecemeal leisure time associated with women’s working lives, in a manner that reflects the role of soap operas and domestic labour historically. What this analysis has contributed to this insight is how this feminized shift in game design contributes to the colonization of this leisure time with a type of ludic productivity delimiting women’s play and fantasy in new ways. At the same time, cultural backlash against these cultural objects indicates the discomfort with revealing the striations of women’s work, play, and engagement.

Regardless of whether *KK:H* is a playful parody, a clever ludic foray, or a successful cash grab, it is a game that illuminates how ludic economies are increasingly spilling out of virtual worlds and merging with advertising, branding, and digital work, across a range of devices and platforms. It demonstrates the “ways in which the greater, more ‘real’ economy is increasingly dematerialized, fictionalized and rendered both virtual and playful” (Goggin 2012, 443) through new ludic economies specifically linked to feminized games. As scholars, we would do well to follow Kardashian’s example and take the power and potential of these kinds of everyday games seriously.

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