Inside the Celebrity-Lust Gaming Boom

Since its release in June, Kim Kardashian: Hollywood has gone from just another time-waster to pop-culture phenomenon. The mobile game—in which you network your way from nobody to A-lister—was played for nearly 3 billion minutes in its first month. It’s inspired think pieces about our obsession with celebrity as well as a Colbert parody (the sadly not-for-sale Stephen Colbert: I’d Tap That). And it’s making tons of money: Though the game is free, you can drop real dollars to buy clothes and boost energy. One analyst predicted annual revenue could hit $200 million.

Game-maker Glu was best known for alpha-male shooters like Deer Hunter 2014. But 18 months ago the company approached Kardashian as part of a Hollywood outreach (Glu also landed the rights for a game tied to the next Terminator film). Frank Lee, co-founder of Drexel University’s game-design program, says Kardashian was an ideal choice: “She’s more like us than other celebrities. There isn’t defined talent that made her famous.”

Kardashian records voice-overs, chooses the game’s outfits and approves content updates. Not everyone is delighted by the results—author Ayelet Waldman cursed out “those vile scumbag Kardashian pigs” after her 11-year-old son spent $120 on the game. But Glu CEO Niccolo de Masi says the company is already talking to music and sports stars for future Kim Kardashian: Hollywood-style games. “We invented this category of gaming,” he says, “and we intend to lead at this category in gaming.”

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