Play like a

Feminist.

Shira Chess

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Playful Thinking

Jesper Juul, Geoffrey Long, William Uricchio, and Mia Consalvo, editors

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This book is dedicated to Charlotte Chess, who I never met.

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On Thinking Playfully

Many people (we series editors included) find video games exhilarating, but it can be just as interesting to ponder why that is so. What do video games do? What can they be used for? How do they work? How do they relate to the rest of the world? Why is play both so important and so powerful?

Playful Thinking is a series of short, readable, and argumentative books that share some playfulness and excitement with the games that they are about. Each book in the series is small enough to fit in a backpack or coat pocket, and combines depth with readability for any reader interested in playing more thoughtfully or thinking more playfully. This includes, but is by no means limited to, academics, game makers, and curious players.

So we are casting our net wide. Each book in our series provides a blend of new insights and interesting arguments with overviews of knowledge from game studies and other areas. You will see this reflected not just in the range of titles in our series but also in the range of authors creating them. Our basic assumption is simple: video games are such a flourishing medium that any new perspective on them is likely to show us something unseen or forgotten, including those from such unconventional

voices as artists, philosophers, or specialists in other industries or fields of study. These books are bridge builders, cross-pollinating both areas with new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

At its heart, this is what Playful Thinking is all about: new ways of thinking about games and new ways of using games to think about the rest of the world.

Jesper Juul
Geoffrey Long
William Uricchio
Mia Consalvo

Who This Book Is For

This book sits at the cross-section of play, video games, and feminism. While this is by no means the first attempt at merging these topics, I have spent a good deal of time thinking about who you are and why you are reading this book.

- *If you identify as a feminist*, but rarely (or never) pick up video games, and worry about the frivolity of your leisure time, this book is meant for you to rethink the value of play and games in various aspects of your life.
- *If you identify as a gamer,* but are not so sure about feminism, this book is meant to help you understand the value of equality, and how embracing feminism might improve video games.
- *If you identify as a feminist gamer,* this book is meant to remind you of many of the arguments you probably already know, and make you think increasingly about improving the play of those around you who may not be there already.

Writing for three distinct audiences is exhausting. Some of you know things that others do not. Some of you might find my arguments obvious, while others might need a broader introduction to certain themes. This book has both footnotes and endnotes.

Endnotes (numbered) are all sources, and footnotes (lettered) are context, commentary, and some additional sources. The footnotes are intended to delve deeper into specific ideas and provide context (both personal and through scholarly research). By the end of this book, I hope that you three distinct audiences will not be so different after all.

A Note about Feminism

Because this feminist book is written, in part, for those who do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists, I want to clarify what the term—often misused and abused—really means. In chapter 1, I break down the definition with more depth, but in brief, as bell hooks writes, feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."[1] Feminism is not a movement about excluding men but rather about equality for all. Sara Ahmed aptly notes that "to live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable."[2] As such, this book is meant to call everything into question and challenge our understanding of play as it relates to larger inequalities.

Acknowledgments

This book was written on the shoulders of giants who inspired me with their scholarship, presentations, and conversations. I have tried to cite as many of you as possible. Thanks to all of you who laid the groundwork for this book. #CiteHerWork

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My gaming circle is fabulous and was a constant inspiration throughout this project. Thanks for putting up with my nudging and suggestions. I appreciate your time and patience. Laura Alexander, Carrie Coker Bishop, Denise Domizi, Amy Ingalls, Glenna Read, Cathy Coker Rumfelt, and Jennifer Smith-Garvin, I'm grateful to you and the other (unnamed) wonderful women who popped in and out of the group. And of course, thank you to the many women who have talked to me about their play in offhand ways over the years; you have all inspired this book.

Thank you to my family for putting up with my fragmented, interstitial time in order to produce a book. Thanks to my parents for a lifetime of encouragement. Thank you to my husband, Wes, for always pushing me at the right moments. And to my son, Oliver, I promise to "play more" from here on out.

Introduction: Why Feminism and Why Play?

Why Should Video Games Matter to Feminists?

This book rides on a few basic premises. The first is this: video games—and play more generally—need to matter more to feminists. Of course, I'm being a bit reductive here; video games already matter to a great number of feminists in a variety of ways. For example, many women and minority game developers who reside in the margins of the industry are endlessly engaged in conversations about why their workplace experiences matter and are indicative of larger issues of toxicity in the tech industry.[1] Similarly, minorities in eSports and competitive gaming are constantly absorbed with debates regarding why video games should matter to feminists.[2a] And certainly, feminists who play games are already deeply enmeshed in the complexities of gaming culture, and indeed know why games and play matter. In part I write this book to speak to those feminists who are, perhaps, not already on board with the multitude of reasons why

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a. In particular, http://anykey.org has done exceptional work creating initiatives to foster equality in online communities, competitive gaming, and eSports.

video games and play should matter to their political, cultural, and social philosophies. Simultaneously, my parallel goal is to start a conversation with those within and around the video game industry who may be ambivalent about feminism more generally. I hope here to convince them as to why feminism might matter to video games, improving an already-astounding medium.

In this way, I liken this book to the old 1980s' Reese's Peanut Butter Cup commercials where oblivious adults blithely collide with each other and boldly declare, "Hey, you got your chocolate in my peanut butter!" and "Hey, you got your peanut butter in my chocolate!" to the discovery that they were both right, and the results are "delicious." Just as with the Reese's discovery, I envision video games and feminism as "two great tastes that taste great together" in a way that is naturalized and obvious. Similar to how the dumbfounded actors discover a sweet combination, I imagine the marriage of video games and feminism to be a head-slapping moment. Why have more people not combined these two great things all along?[b] Sara Ahmed writes that feminism is "the dynamism of making connections."[3] To this end, the Reese's collision can be seen as one full of feminist potential. Similarly, I am connecting play and video games with feminism to demonstrate their simpatico.

Because while many feminist video game scholars have made these connections before, they have often gone largely unseen within the larger public discourse surrounding video games for the last two decades. News stories and op-eds typically focus on

b. But of course, many already have! Shout-out to the many feminist game scholars I reference throughout this book.

the negative, sensational, or most toxic elements of the medium, culture, and industry. Thus it feels like myself and many of my colleagues have had to do hard work to break out of this insular bubble. Opinion editorials and news stories frequently galvanize their distrust of the video game medium by concentrating on violent game content, starting with games like the 1976 *Death Race* through the Grand Theft Auto series, or any number of sniper games. It is understandable that this emphasis has seemed to put video games at odds with feminism—in particular when games like *Grand Theft Auto III* allow players to court and then kill prostitutes with no consequence.[c] Additionally, much debate has gone into whether video games are addictive (a diagnosis officially decreed by the World Health Organization in 2018); this is a complicated claim, which creates some troubling misconceptions about the medium.[d] Finally, in a post-GamerGate world, it is difficult to consider video game culture and industry apart from the toxic forces that have deliberately pushed out feminine influences.[e]

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c. In fact, my research into video games began from a moment many years ago when a professor asked me to investigate this very thing through a feminist lens.

d. In my experience, when most people call a video game "addictive," they are using that word instead of "enjoyable." While I am sure there are people who exhibit unwanted behaviors from playing video games and in some cases there might be actual clinical addiction, most of the time it is players feeling uncomfortable with their own levels of enjoyment.

e. GamerGate is a hashtag campaign perpetrated by the alt-right, deliberately targeting women within and around the video game industry. It began in 2014, and has been discussed and outlined a great deal. There is not enough space to fully unpack GamerGate in this book, but for those interested in the topic I would recommend reading articles by Torill E. Mortenson and Adrienne Massanari that provide a historical context.

GamerGate sits in an impossible position in this book. There is no question that the toxicity of GamerGate is one impetus for its writing. At the same time, by maintaining a focus on the hashtag movement I would inevitably be reifying it and giving it a central position, which makes my stomach turn. This book is forward looking and tries to be positive, but not positivist. From my current position, it is also impossible to ignore that the grotesqueness of GamerGate is quietly shadowed with equally toxic forces in academia.[f] In short, there are terrible people everywhere. Or as Adrienne Shaw writes, "The Internet is full of jerks, because the world is full of jerks."[4] I choose to use the (small) megaphone of this book to focus on cultivating the potential positives, as opposed to nestling myself in the often-noxious realities.

Any of the aforementioned factors might cause feminists—in particular, those feminists who are not already engaged in the discussion of why video games matter—to push back against the idea that playing a video game can be a feminist activity. But cumulatively, they have created a deep tension wherein many feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists have shied away from the medium. Additionally, the long-standing reputation that these products are designed for intended audiences of men and boys creates a sense that video games and feminism are necessarily, irrevocably, diametrically opposed. This conceit began as partially true—in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, men and boys were the primary audience for video games. Now, though, roughly half of all video game players identify as female, and

f. This observation was made in a hot tub in Montreal, while soaking with two Adriennes (Shaw and Massanari). Apologies to Judith Butler and Donna Haraway for stealing their footnote.

given that shift, it is important for feminists—both gamers and nongamers—to get on the same page.

Video game audiences have changed substantially in recent years. While from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, video games *were* primarily designed and marketed to a presumed masculine audience, a combination of technological innovation and the interventions of feminist game players/creators aligned, not only to reshape what is possible in video games, but suggest ways to rethink feminist practices. In turn, rather than looking at video games as a space that only invites negative and violent experiences, it can be one that feminists can better own (or as I argue later in this book, a space that feminists can better PWN).[g]

Yet the "feminist potential" of video games is also complicated. Sarah Banet-Weiser uses the term "popular feminism" to describe consumptive and neoliberal "feminist" practices that reify existing power structures. She writes that "in a capitalist, corporate economy of visibility, those feminisms that are most easily commodified and branded are those that become most visible. This means, most of the time, that the popular feminism that is most viable is that which is white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual."[5] So as much as I advocate for the nostalgia of a nonchalant moment wherein theoretical peanut butter collides with theoretical chocolate, turning it into a seamless new product, I also recognize that capitalism breeds an understandable amount of cynicism toward the feminist production of mass-market products. Video games are a consumable product in a capitalist system. Advocating that feminism play a

g. PWN is a term I employ in chapter 2 of this book, using common video game lingo to tease out how feminists might find an "epic win" by thinking differently about leisure.

role in this system requires a delicacy so as to not reify the very things that this book is arguing against.

Video games are primed for change. We have seen an influx of women players, and roughly half of all players currently identify as female, although many of those players don't have a strong sense of ownership over the medium.[h] If we are to change things, however, it means many of us have to play more.[i] The goal of this book, then, is to convince you—all of you, regardless of your gender orientation, biological sex, ethnicity, ability, social class, or stance toward feminism—to spend more time playing as a tool of radical disruption. This book is intended to pull more people into the conversation. Rather than thinking about what is wrong with video games, I want us to start plotting out ways to make them better. To do this, we need to acknowledge that games—and video games in particular—*matter*.

Moreover, in this book I begin with a far more basic argument: that *play* is an issue of equality. Because feminism is not a movement solely about women but instead one about equal rights, this makes play a core feminist issue. Feminism has accomplished much, yet often "play" as a central vector for well-being falls to the wayside. This seems obvious in some ways. *Feminists have work to do. We have too much work to make time for*

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h. These statistics are messy, of course. Surveys of who is playing games vary depending on who is asked, what games are considered "games," and how we define "female."

i. This applies to both feminist and gamer audiences: feminists who are not already playing video games need to play more, and gamers too need to play more, but perhaps play different—play games outside their comfort zones. Furthermore, gamers can play the games they already do differently in order to interrupt poor practices in online places and make space for better ones.

play. But play, I would contend, affords a quality of life that the work of feminism has largely not remarked upon. In order to live the best possible life and think in clear-eyed ways about equality, we need to find more inroads to play.

This is because, as Miguel Sicart persuasively argues, play matters. It matters in a variety of contexts and toward a myriad of causes. Sicart elegantly writes that play is not necessarily fun, and "is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism."[6] In other words, play has power, and in helming that power, feminisms can find new strategies for overcoming political and cultural oppression—not only for women, but for all underrepresented populations. By engaging in radical play, we can work inside and outside of systems in creative ways that push at the margins.[j] Play matters, and radical play can improve the lives of players. Video games, I maintain, are one possible trajectory for finding a more playful feminism, for engaging in radical play. It is not the only one, and I discuss several strategies and pathways. But to me, a playful feminism necessitates a rethinking of the power of video games as a medium. To this end, I begin this book by talking more generally about play and ultimately move toward the specifics of why video games matter.

"I Never Knew That Games like That Existed!"

In 2017, I published a book on video games designed for women audiences.[7] Following the publication of that book, I experienced something unexpected. I was increasingly approached by women from a variety of backgrounds who confided in me

j. "Radical play," as I use it in this book, is play that is disruptive in big and small ways to the status quo.

their experiences with video games. These moments were distinct from previous points in my life when strangers and friends (women in particular) spoke to me about my research. In the past, I was told, "Oh, I would never play video games. *I don't have the time for play*," or "You study video games? They are so violent!"[k] Over the last few years, I noticed an abrupt shift. Instead, women—the kind of women who never before approached me in positive ways about my research—confessed their love of or interest in video games.

The things women said to me at these moments vary, but there were consistent themes. Their identities differed wildly in age, ethnicity, sexuality, and perspective. Some of these women wanted to know if I had played a game they loved ("You've played *Stardew Valley*, right? I'm so obsessed with it."). Sometimes students would come to me after a lecture I gave on the topic and confess that they had been long obsessed with *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, and felt validated to see *their* culture being talked about. At a birthday party, a mom told me that three generations of her family all played *Clash of Clans* together. Others told me that they tried a new game after I wrote about or recommended it. These responses were the most jarring: "I never knew that games like *that* existed!"

I never knew that games like that existed. This last comment shook me every time I heard it, especially in reference to artful games such as *Monument Valley* or *Gorogoa*—two games that similarly had affected me with their sublime beauty. It began to occur to me that many audiences—women audiences in particular—had

k. I have a distinct memory of telling a dentist what I was studying in graduate school, and while she angrily and violently probed my mouth, she declared that she did not allow video games in her home because they were too violent.

no idea what video games had become or are capable of being.[1] At the same time, I felt certain that if more nongamers started to voice their enthusiasm for these games, they would help to support an emerging market, creating the diversity many of us have so long yearned for in the industry. Just as video games can help feminism, feminism can help video games.

I quickly became a video game evangelist. I began to strike up conversations with women I hardly knew (or didn't know at all!), encouraging them to play more games. I found myself having an increasing number of dialogues that resulted in recommendations. Once, a student reporter came to my office to get a quote on video games and addiction. As she began, she confessed to me, "I don't actually know anything about video games. I don't play them." By the time she left my office, she excitedly held a piece of paper listing the games she planned to download that night. I felt like a doctor prescribing play.

Why Feminism Should Matter to Gamers

I started by asserting what to me seems like an obvious point: that video games need to matter to feminists. This book, however, is also meant to argue the reverse point as well: feminism needs to matter more to video games, both to the industry at large and those individuals who are beholden to that industry. This, again,

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1. Many, of course, have argued that games are not actually art (most notably the late Roger Ebert). Felan Parker astutely notes that this public debate has had far-reaching implications for discourses in colloquial discussions about games. Not only is this perspective incorrect; it limits how we move forward with this medium in the future. See Felan Parker, "Roger Ebert and the Games as Art Debate," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 3 (2018): 77–100.

might feel counterintuitive. To some extent, the video game industry has been at odds with feminism in a variety of ways for some years, whether that is in critique of the absurdly proportioned Lara Croft or in response to the toxicity promoted within GamerGate. Yet it is wrongheaded to think of feminism and video games as being at odds with one another. As Lisa Nakamura deftly states, "This is precisely the moment for games scholarship originating from ethnic studies, women's studies, queer studies, film studies, and cultural studies to intervene in this ongoing conversation, and to strategize about the future of race, gender, sexuality, and digital media."[8] The time is right for an intervention.

Video game audiences have already begun to diversify. In recent years it has been (ironically) the occurrences surrounding GamerGate that has made the presence of feminist gamers obvious. GamerGate has galvanized many of the disenfranchised voices that have been engaging in game culture—both quietly and not so quietly—for decades now. But even more important, an increasing number of feminists are en route to becoming gamers. The medium of video games is still quite young, and the market is still figuring itself out. While it may have previously been acceptable to appeal solely to niche masculine markets, this is no longer going to remain a viable business plan. As the medium continues to grow up, diversity is a glorious inevitability, and one that the industry should wholeheartedly embrace.

But there is more at play in terms of why feminism should matter to video games than simply expanding a market. Thinking about feminism can make video games *better*.

Video games, as a format and medium, are in need of a platform-expanding, metaphysical explosion. There are ruts and assumptions that have, for so long, ruled how things are done. By appealing to a singular audience (or a few, core audiences),

we are missing opportunities for innovation, creativity, and dramatic overhauls of how we think about games and play.[m] An example of this is the central premise of Christopher A. Paul's *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*. Paul's argument is that the philosophy of "meritocracy" is the dominant premise of most video games and consequently a damaging force in video game culture.[9] Paul links these trends, suggesting that the one hinges on the other. So if we rethink some of the underlying philosophies of video games, and if we invite in new ideological premises that are meant to destabilize and disrupt, what might video games look like? To my mind, they can only look better.

We have already seen hints of this change. While not all women are feminists, and not all feminists are women, the shifting demographics of the video game industry illustrates that new technologies, audiences, and ways of thinking about what a video game can be have only helped push the medium. In 2009, the video game industry was composed of only 11 percent women, and that number doubled to 22 percent by 2014.[10] In that time, we have seen an explosion of new kinds of games and gaming. Some of this, of course, is due to rapid technological developments. Yet technology can only revolutionize so much, and I would argue that the truly innovative and artful video games that we have seen in the past decade are due to the slow but steady diversification of *who* is making video games.[n]

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m. We can see evidence of these stylistic and structural changes happening, particularly within the indie games movement.

n. To this point, it seems like video game innovation for a long time meant more realistic, faster-rendering graphics. Innovation now increasingly means new styles of games and play.

Video games need feminism just as much as feminism needs video games.

And so if you are someone who already knows the power of digital gaming yet is perhaps dubious about the import of feminism, stick around. This book is for you too. I hope that by the end, I can convince you not only that feminism is an important social movement for everyone but also that you should become an evangelist, trying to convince nongaming feminists to play more. It is my hope to bring you on board, help create safe spaces for feminist gaming, and help us move feminist gaming away from the margins and toward the center. It is not enough for this book to convince feminists to play; we need *you* in the video game industry and culture to help make that play possible as well as accessible.

To this end, radical play toys with what Paolo Ruffino refers to as "Creative Game Studies." Beyond just thinking about play for the sake of play, Ruffino writes of scholarly interventions as inherently "intuitive, timely, performative, ethical, anti-authoritarian and anxious" in how it engages with video games. To my mind, it is the "anti-authoritarian" mode that positions it as a kind of radical play. Ruffino explains that "Creative Game Studies should produce anti-authoritarian narratives around video game culture, and these narratives should be produced as events of game culture, as timely intuitions that question the other co-existent stories around the medium."[11] The role of the playful researcher is not just to inform; it is to disrupt, produce anxiety around, and influence as a kind of dramatic intervention into the product. My arguments in this book might make you uncomfortable at times, and that is fine. I am here to make you just a little bit uneasy.

Why This Book

This book is meant as a provocation and intervention. It is a book about video games not only meant for those who already play games but also for those who do not. It is a book about feminism, but not only for those who identify as feminists. I begin, however, not with video games but instead with play more generally in order to make this case. In this sense, this is also a book about play for those who are skeptical about playing. The purpose of this is to make a compelling argument as to why you (yes, you!) should care about and engage with play and games as a feminist activity. We need to spend more time thinking about play, and more time disrupting practices of and with play. The value of play within feminist lives is not frivolous. It is an issue that should be taken both seriously and playfully. At the same time, this is a book about feminism, meant for people who love video games. It is my contention throughout this book that video games can only be improved by embracing feminist theory. I am here to convince you (yes, you!) why feminism matters.

There is surely an intersectional issue underlying this interplay between feminism and games—one that I address throughout this book. "Intersectionality," a term originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is meant to reference how systems of oppression such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class should be understood as interdependent phenomena.[12] In other words, questions of oppression in each of these categories do not function in a vacuum, and feminists should not think about gender difference as separate from ethnicity, sexuality, or social class. Given this, we need to talk about how things like social class might create additional barriers to entry for players. If a

person is working several jobs and running a household, talking about the value of leisure and play becomes condescending. If a person cannot afford an iPhone, recommending lists of games they should play—even free-to-play games—is dismissive of the lived realities of their life. And while playing as protest is a potentially freeing idea, one needs time, resources, and other accommodations in order to protest.

But again, this book is an intervention and provocation. It is needfully short, and meant for you to play with a lot of ideas, take them out, and engage others, helping them make their own playful discoveries.[o] This book is meant to nudge folks toward rabbit holes and ask them to peer in to admire the depth. I believe that if we find a way to talk about leisure equality, acknowledging not only our personal needs for play and leisure but those of others around us as well, then we can make this world better. I am a white, middle-class woman writing this book, and hold no illusions; many of my readers are likely educated and middle class. As a white feminist, I do not seek to centralize my experiences and needs over those of women of color, financially disadvantaged women, queer women, and disabled women but rather find better ways to advocate for these audiences, for they need more play too.[p] I believe that if we think about feminist play as a play of equality, then it can filter into the lives of people who

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o. The length of this book is a conceit of MIT's Playful Thinking series.

p. Jessie Daniels writes about the decentralization of white feminism as both necessary and full of risk, but also risk that needs to be taken. See Jessie Daniels, "The Trouble with White Feminism: Whiteness, Digital Feminism, and the Intersectional Internet," in *Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 41–60.

have not read this book. If we think about the things we do in our free time generously and take a stance that we all deserve a certain quality of life, then everyone wins.

To this end, "inclusivity" is a necessary theme in this book, but with caveats. Amanda Phillips warns that representation is only a small part of this puzzle in the quest toward inclusivity. She writes, "Representation and inclusion are important to help us imagine and believe in new spaces of possibility, but they are small steps in a more expansive quest for justice. More often than not, lack of diversity is a symptom of larger systemic problems rather than the cause of inequality."[13] Similarly, Larisa Kingston Mann warns that in digital media, we should not "replicate hierarchies of the past" in how we structure scholarship and activism.[14] In other words, in order to look at how video games can be improved and the culture around them can be upgraded, we need to look at broader problems. One of the goals of writing this book, then, is to remain mindful of the larger inequalities and hierarchies structured into our cultural understanding of video game play, and more broadly, academic research. The question, "Who gets to play?" is an important one, but just as important is the question, "Who gets to define play?"[q] Inclusivity is part of the narrative, but we need to constantly acknowledge that its lack is due to larger forces of inequity that are structured within multiple layers of culture.

q. By asking, "Who gets to define play?" I am suggesting that we, as academics, need to gatekeep less and acknowledge in our own work that there is not a hierarchy of play.

How This Book Is Organized

Play like a Feminist takes a somewhat discursive path to interrogate inequalities and suggest possible solutions. I begin by considering women, girls, and play more generally. In chapter 1, "Playing like a Girl," I start by disentangling the insult that one "plays like a girl" from biological and cultural perspectives. The phrase has been deployed as both an insult and term of empowerment, but there are limitations to its rallying cry. I conclude by transforming the phrase into "play like a feminist" as an actionable practice of playful disruption and means of rethinking the value of leisure in feminism.

In the second chapter, "PWNing Leisure," I move from analyzing play to analyzing leisure. Here I argue for the importance of feminist leisure practices, demonstrating how leisure disparities often seep into gendered behaviors. Leisure, I suggest, needs to be about advocacy for others in addition to free time for oneself. To this end, I repurpose the gaming term "PWN" as a perspective for considering how feminists might be best able to PWN their leisure practices. I offer five major strategies that feminists can use to PWN their leisure.

In the third chapter, "Play to Protest," I argue for the value of play when approaching activism and protest. The chapter begins with a historical overview of global playful protest methods. Additionally, I propose and discuss the use of pervasive gaming and alternate reality games as a potential mechanism for creating social change. Finally, I consider how combining technology with playful practice might offer modes of lulzy protest for feminisms.

Chapter 4, "Gaming Feminism," returns to the topic of video games to advocate for readers to think about how, specifically,

video games can become a kind of feminist playground. I begin by talking about the history and culture of games that push back against feminism. Using several games as examples, I discuss how feminist video games can make us rethink ways to tells stories, and how they can become "agentic training tools." To this end, I argue that we should perhaps consider the destruction of the video game industry as it is currently known, creating a better one in its wake.

All the previous arguments lead up to chapter 5, "Gaming in Circles," in which I propose "gaming circles" as a means of feminists taking back leisure, play, and video game culture. Gaming circles, as I envision them, function like book clubs for leisure. Using a local gaming circle that I constructed as an example, I discuss the potential of these circles as a kind of actionable practice to realign feminism with play. This chapter both unpacks the experiences of members of my local gaming circle while advocating for ways to sustain it as a broader practice toward playing like a feminist. The appendix of this book offers a blueprint for readers to make their own gaming circle. A companion website (http://playlikeafeminist.com) supplies further ideas and suggestions for putting together your own gaming circle.

The goal of this book is not better answers but rather better questions. It follows a discursive path littered with provocations about how we play and how we do leisure. It is not meant to be the final word on these themes but instead a starting point for broader cultural conversations about the role of play and leisure in feminism, and vice versa. Regardless of your identity on arriving here, I hope that this book will help convince you to be a gamer, feminist, and advocate.

1 Playing like a Girl

Grandma Wilcox Ruins Everything

When I was in grade school, I hated sports more than anything else in the world. I was creative yet awkward and uncoordinated—a combination that resulted in being the kid who was rarely picked for teams and dreaded physical education class. For me, the worst day of the year was field day—a kind of mini-Olympics that children in the United States are forced to endure annually. Growing up, field day typically involved a series of relay races, seemingly random physical challenges, and more sweat than I was ever truly comfortable with. For context, I ran so poorly that my playground nickname was (at one point) "Grandma Wilcox"—in retrospect, a rather high-concept way of relaying that I ran like someone's grandmother.[a]

In my memory, the worst field day year was in the third grade. The class was abuzz with a particular anxiety about my substandard running skills. Yet everyone participated in field day, and so my teacher assigned me to run in a "circle relay

a. The name seems to be based on a grandmother who, oddly, had a completely different surname than me.

race," much to the chagrin of my cohort. After some amount of meeting and discussion, a strategy was apparently formed. My best friend confided in the other kids that I was afraid of dogs, based on an incident where I was chased by one. Thus the plan to not lose the relay culminated in my classmates barking loudly during the race in order to encourage me to run faster.[b] Despite the barking, our class still lost the competition. A little girl came over to me after and told me flatly, "We lost because of you. You run like a girl."[c]

Just like that.

Running like a girl (or I guess, a grandmother) is a subgenre of a larger insult—one that I heard throughout school until my tweens, when I stopped engaging with sports altogether. I was told, repeatedly, that *I played like a girl*.

But what does it mean to play like a girl? Of course, I played like a girl; *I identified as a girl*. In particular, it seems markedly peculiar that it was a *girl* who berated my running, and accused me of this thing that was so obvious and yet such a baseline insult. I don't know that at the time I fully parsed what running or playing like a girl really meant—only that it was subpar and worthy of insult. Playing like a girl seemed to imply that girl play was somehow innately inferior to boy play in a binary sense.[d] I wonder to this day what the girl (whose name I've since forgotten, though I still can picture her freckles and pageboy haircut)

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b. As it happens, I had such an intense adrenaline rush that I did indeed run faster, prompting the kids to bark louder and with more fervor, yelling, "IT'S WORKING!"

c. I tattled. She got in trouble.

d. This kind of cataloging of play, of course, reifies gender binaries in the strictest sense.

thought of her own play. She too seemed to identify as a girl. Did she think she played like one? Did she think she played like a boy? Was her vision of gendered binaries more subtle than her insult implied? What would make a girl abuse another girl in this way?

I sit with these questions still. In part, this is because I still play like a girl. While I gave up on sports a long time ago (I never did get coordinated), play in my life has remained feminized and easily derided. I play video games, but most of the games I play are those designed for feminine demographics.[e] I partake in other leisure activities, but many of them are either domestically oriented or often scorned for their femininity.[f] Women and girl cultures are readily mocked within the arena of broader public lives. This starts at girlhood (in which princess play is devalued in comparison to superhero play) and continues into adulthood (in which romance novels and melodramas are treated as having less cultural value than other films).[1] If I am going to be completely honest, I don't play a lot. But when I do, I play like a girl or woman. I play along cisgendered expectations of my biological sex.[g] And because of the cultural perceptions of the play I select in my life, these activities always feel tenuous and unimportant.

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e. I cannot count the number of times I have been interviewed about my research during which the interviewer—usually male—pauses and asks point-blank, "But do you *play* video games?" My response to this sexist question is typically to explain the kind of games I play, which usually gets a condescending "oh, I see" from the interviewer. Even as an "expert," my choices are (apparently) questionable.

f. I love a good romantic comedy, but please don't tell anyone.

g. The term "cisgender" refers to people whose gender aligns with their biological sex.

Girls, Boys, and Play

Thus far I've been throwing some words around pretty carelessly, packing them with assumptions that are infused with both biological and cultural meanings. What do we mean when we say that someone "plays like a girl," and what significance does this phrase carry with it? The insult has baggage, and the implicit assumptions of biological difference are still learned in the cultural setting of childhood schoolyards. They also seem to presume an unrealistic binary of what "boy" and "girl" look like.

In her important sociological study of play, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, Barrie Thorne argues against the commonly held belief that girls and boys have innately distinct cultures when it comes to play. In her study, Thorne observed children across two different cities and several elementary grades, analyzing the behavioral and psychological differences that explain *how* gender separation happens. She concludes that this dualism that belies our assumptions regarding contrasting girl and boy play is largely performed as well as constructed as a way that reifies adult expectations of sex and gender. In turn, she warns that we should move away from a "dualistic rut," and instead asserts that "if we begin by assuming different cultures, separate spheres, or contrastive differences, we will also end up with a sharp sense of dichotomy rather than attending to multiple differences and sources of commonality."[2] In other words, while there may be distinctions between how girls and boys play, these differences are frequently slighter than we acknowledge, and not necessarily indicative of physiological or biological imperatives. Furthermore, we—adults—often frame biological gender difference as more distinct than it actually is. We perform play for our

parents, guardians, teachers, and peers in ways that are culturally acceptable and deemed appropriate.

Similarly, in her essay "Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," Iris Marion Young pushes back against the biological determinism of psychologists who had previously asserted that play differences are measurably different between girls and boys. These previous studies that she refutes suggest that because gender difference occurs at a young age, it can only be caused by biologically based anatomy. Refuting this claim, Young argues that the particularities of the disclaimer "like a girl" (which can be applied to a variety of athletic moments) are tremors born of a culture in which society almost immediately handicaps perceived femininity. To this point, she concludes that "girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys to develop specific bodily skills."[3] Young's contentions match nicely with the sociological observations made by Thorne: playing like a girl might be treated like an identifiable gendered trait, but it is something we teach our children (intentionally or unintentionally) from birth. Our alignment with cis expectations that children fall into one of two categories—girls or boys—reifies a false narrative.

The conclusions of these works, of course, would be unsurprising to those who have studied gender difference. Famously, Judith Butler theorized that gender is a kind of "performativity"—a distinction not necessarily the same as "performance." Performance would be something conscious and mindful. Instead, Butler's performativity invokes Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation." Althusser uses the term to describe how we are

not born into an ideology but instead are hailed by specific ideologies and then ultimately internalize them.[4h] So then Butler's use of interpellation suggests that our gender performativity typically occurs from the time of birth ("It's a girl!"), wherein we internalize and behave like the gender we are told is biologically determined.[i] In other words, we base our assumptions (such as "playing like a girl") around the normative perceptions of what "girl" might look like and how a girl might be expected to play. Girling does not happen in a vacuum; it is enacted in both public and private spaces.

Additionally, none of these things account for genderqueer, gender-fluid, intersex, and transgender identities. By suggesting that gender identity falls into the category of "girl" or "boy," we miss opportunities to understand the complex, nuanced system present in lived experiences. Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson argue for "postmodern pedagogies" in order to push back against research (both market and academic) that reifies myopic gender binaries, and then pathologizes them in ways that serve the status quo. Speaking specifically of video game play and expectations, they write, "We argue, then, for a conscientious

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h. The most commonly used example for Althusser's theory of interpellation is a police officer yelling "hey you!" Turning around to acknowledge the hail, makes you the subject of that hail—*you* turn into the "you." Althusser argues that in this way, we are hailed by ideologies in our everyday lives: if we believe that an ideology is speaking to us, it is speaking to us, and we identify with it and become the subject of that ideology, much like the "hey you!" moment.

i. As already noted, interpellation is a fluid concept accounting for any ideological buy-in. To this end, it might be helpful for those readers who consider themselves "gamers" to think about how the identity of "gamer" is a similarly hailed one.

retooling of children's games not to consolidate gender, which of course means far more than 'sex,' but to fracture and fragment and disperse difference/s, because playing today turns out, after all, to be a deadly serious business."[5] Thus the idea of playing like a girl becomes troubling not only from the perspective of how it constructs girlhood but also in how it refuses to acknowledge the lived realities of those who do not neatly conform to a system of false binaries.

The act of "playing like a girl" is culturally constructed, subjective, and without a stable set of meanings. When the child on the playground accused me of running and playing like a girl, these conceits were empirically meaningless.[j] Yet the phrase carries weight. Elementary school–age children are not typically educated in the fluidity and complexity of gender difference. What they know, all they know, is what they have been culturally taught: girl play is substandard, and to "play like a girl" means playing badly. But it is also important to consider Ahmed's sentiment that "girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed as a girl but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl we can do this to you."[6] Being *girled*—and consequentially insulted for my *girling*—was a thing done to me because the culture allowed for it. And while this girling of gendered play might be reinforced by adults, the ramifications ultimately seep back into playground politics, reifying gender stereotypes that portray girls as weak, unathletic, uncoordinated, and perhaps even less fun.

That last point—that girls might be "less fun"—is one to ponder for a moment because it is never something explicit in the

j. This was unsurprising, I suppose, given that she was eight.

"like a girl" qualifier—never something overtly asserted as in "she has fun like a girl." Yet that is the underlying implication of all the other "like a girl" insults. We can see the subtext of this "less fun" in the gendered toys that are often marketed to girls: utilitarian kitchen and grocery shopping sets, pint-size brooms, and beauty and self-care products intended for little girls.[k] Playing like a girl, the subtext seems to imply, is less fun, less playful, and more serious. Regardless of Cyndi Lauper's famous lyrics that "girls just want to have fun," the result of play-based girling raises the specter that they might not have the same capacity for fun as boys, or at the very least, that the fun had by girls looks vastly different. But is fun necessary? Bonnie Ruberg has cleverly challenged the premise that necessitates "fun" as integral to game design. As an alternative, Ruberg explains, "The spirit of no-fun is the spirit of alternatives, of disruptions, of difference."[7] Ruberg makes a solid observation that by pushing against "fun," we are able to use play as a more disruptive practice—one that challenges worldviews. Nevertheless, it is difficult to think about the aspirations of childhood without wanting some degree of "funness" as part of the association.

Thus if we take a step back and think about "playing like a girl" in terms of "having fun like a girl," the rhetoric becomes haunting: Are we inadvertently suggesting to young girls that

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k. It feels worth noting that many parents—myself included—purchase these things for boy children as well. Many of us, however, do this with the conscious choice to push back against gendered norms of play. If a toy shopping cart is purchased at the "girl" section of Toys"R"Us, to what extent are norms still being reified on some level? There are no easy answers to this question, although it seems important to continue to ask it.

their fun is less than, less fun, less playful, and less satisfying? In the phrase, "play like a girl," are we signaling to girls—and later, women—that they have less capacity to have fun? If this is the case, then just as Young indicated that girls are taught from childhood how *not* to move their bodies to their full capacity and potential, are we also teaching them on a psychological level that they cannot have the same capacity for fun as boys? Pushing back against the pejorative "play like a girl" means more than just promoting athleticism; it is a rhetoric of finding a more fun and playful existence for girls that can later seep into the mundanity of adulthood.

"Play like a Girl!"

Declaring that someone "plays like a girl," however, is not always deployed as an insult. Recent years have seen a change in the sentiment behind the phrase "play like a girl." While certainly it might still be used as a slur on schoolyards, it has been repurposed and revalued as a feminist charge. In this, to "play like a girl!" (with an explicit exclamation point) has been upcycled to evoke a feminist play of power. This shift occurred as Title IX legislation in the United States seeped more broadly into the cultural milieu of schools, universities, and organizations.[1]

There are several notable examples of this: a nonprofit that is decidedly *not* profiting off the phrase, a Lizzo song, a Nike

1. In the United States, Title IX legislation guarantees that no person may be denied participation in an activity based on sex, if the organization is receiving federal funding. This has resulted in increased funding for women's and girls' sports, among other things. Title IX was passed in 1972.

campaign titled "What are girls made of," and an award-winning commercial from the menstrual pad brand Always that absconded with and repurposed the phrase "like a girl," turning it into a hashtag of empowerment (#LikeAGirl). These campaigns are nothing if not complicated. They offer pathways to empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing dangerous stereotypes and gender binaries. They rest in a space of conflict that makes us ask if the "feminist activism" of brands is helping or hurting the cause they purport to be supporting.

Take, for example, the Always campaign that first aired during a Super Bowl and subsequently won an Emmy Award in 2015.[m] The extended advertisement begins with a rhetorical question, "What does it mean to do something 'like a girl,'" with children (gender-conforming boys and girls) responding on what appears to be an audition stage. Initially, those interviewed respond to the request to "run like a girl" by gesticulating in absurdly overstated ways (hands flailing, feet pointed outward, and hips swaying). Similarly, requests to "fight like a girl" result in hands flapping, heads shaking, and silly ineffective gestures. Then they ask even younger girls to reply to the same requests, but these responses occur more proudly and in earnest. The commercial asks when "like a girl" became an insult, and put the phrase in question to children, asking if it is good or bad. As the extended advertisement takes a turn toward the positive, girls begin to say more affirming things as a message to those who are younger than them:

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m. Given the implied masculinity of the event, the Super Bowl always seemed like an odd place to pilot this ad campaign. Yet perhaps that's the point, and I respect the attempt at upending our gendered expectations.

- "I run like a girl because I am a girl and that is not something I should be ashamed of."
- "Why can't run 'like a girl' also mean win the race?"
- "If someone else says that running like a girl, or kicking like a girl, or shooting like a girl, is something that you shouldn't be doing, that's their problem."[n]

Ultimately the campaign is a response to the idea that a girl's self-esteem tends to plummet during the age range of puberty—uncoincidentally, the same moment when girls might begin to use the menstrual products being sold in the advertisement.

The reception to the campaign (there were several ads beyond the initial extended one shown during the Super Bowl) was mostly positive. As already noted, it won an Emmy for "Best Commercial."[8] Jillian Berman from the *Huffington Post* called the advertisement "groundbreaking" for its positive and affirming position on feminine care products.[9] In refutation, Charlotte Allen from the *Los Angeles Times* maintained that the commercial did more to bolster stereotypes than push against them, suggesting that the argument for the commercial is that the language is not OK, but does not dispute the underlying sentiment. Allen explains, "The aim of 'Like a Girl' isn't to raise girls' self-esteem. It's to police everybody else's language."[10]

I find myself conflicted regarding the #LikeAGirl campaign. For sure, this is an improvement on commercials for feminine hygiene products, which have been mocked relentlessly for decades in their attempts to both broadcast their products yet not speak of the taboos of menstruation. And to this end, it is

n. Presumably, she was speaking here of shooting baskets in basketball.

worth noting that in kind, the #LikeAGirl commercials don't talk about menstruation either; they seem to want to bypass the societal edicts in which we hide a topic of biological necessity as it relates to many women. Yet one has to wonder if the "like a girl" of the commercial is in some way a response to menstruation. Is the tacit implication of these commercials that athletic feats can, should, or must be performed during menses? By not addressing the biological function of menstruation, the commercial series seems to be skirting the most obvious aspect of most female athleticism—a commonality wherein sometimes one has to run, throw, and play while bleeding vaginally.[o] The biological complexities of adult female bodies continue to complicate our notions of athleticism. In 2019, for example, Nike had a series of public relations kerfuffles regarding pregnant women athletes, resulting in policy changes to specifically protect athlete pregnancy.[11p]

Returning to the premise of the #LikeAGirl" commercial, there is certainly some good here. The creators are attempting to repurpose a phrase once thought of negatively. It is an illustration—one of many—of advertisers hoping to repurpose feminism as a sales pitch. For instance, Dara Persis Murray situates Dove soap's "real beauty campaign" within a larger

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o. I acknowledge, of course, that this might not always be the case for a variety of reasons. The company selling menstrual products, however, surely must be targeting an audience that regularly endures vaginal bleeding of various flows and degrees.

p. Briefly explained, mother and professional runner Alysia Montaño wrote a 2019 op-ed on Mother's Day implicating Nike for cutting the pay of pregnant athletes. Nike responded by changing its policy and practices.

historical context of advertisers both playing into and against popular feminist speech, creating ambivalent results that produce "complex visions of women."[12] To that end, the #LikeAGirl series is just that: another reuse of feminist rhetoric to market a product to women in "woke" ways. Yet the campaign's greatest flaw, as I see it, is in making "like a girl" a tangible, performable, knowable thing. The advertisements seem to suggest that there is a specific way to play like a girl, thereby reifying gender binaries in counterproductive ways. To what end do the commercials perform the very stereotypes they are attempting to push against?[q]

The problem with the emphatic feminist-proud statement that one "plays like a girl!" is that it seems to necessitate a kind of gender essentialism. The statement lacks an acknowledgment of intersectionality, and suggests a binary wherein girl/boy play is distinct and fathomable.[r] Whether it has a positive or negative connotation, then, to "play like a girl" still implies a great deal of boundary creation that defines who gets to play and what that play might look like. Furthermore, to declare that one "play like a girl!" enthusiastically is to ignore the lived realities of playground politics and assume that adults can realign socialized sentiments by simply stating that they are incorrect. Most important, Always and similar campaigns (such as the Nike one) seem to simply be replacing "boy" with "girl" in a way that does not laud girl play so much as it suggests that girls play more like

q. For what it's worth the Lizzo version of emphatic "Like a Girl!" does a whole lot better than the Always campaign.

r. It does not acknowledge the reality that some people (I would argue, most people) do not play discernibly like girls *or* boys, and that play is far more complex than a gendered binary could possibly account for.

boys. It bolsters girls by implying that the path toward equality nullifies sexual difference rather than celebrates diversity.[s] It maintains the narrative of cisgendered ideologies. While as previously noted, physiological and biological differences aren't everything, they are not nothing either. While "play like a girl!" can be meant as an affirmation in these contexts, it only succeeds as a slight improvement from the playground antics where the phrase was formerly an insult.

Playing like a Woman

Thus far I've limited questions of play and femininity to one particular period of the life cycle: girlhood. But a feminist analysis of play needs to go beyond the particularities of childhood—where play is obvious and often—and consider how play functions in the lives of adult women. This sends us into a tricky space, of course; adulthood, generally speaking, is not built in a way that we typically consider how adults *play*. Additionally, it's easy when discussing play and femininity to conflate several points in the life cycle. Playing like a girl changes and becomes a different thing as girls shift toward womanhood, and it is important to not let the former eclipse the latter.

Chapter 2 of this book focuses specifically on women's leisure—a kind of adult read of what free time looks like. But for now, it is useful to take a step back and consider what "playing like a woman" might look like. If "playing like a girl" is both

s. This idea seems to echo the conceits of second-wave feminism nicely, wherein proponents chose to highlight a "girls can do anything boys can do" philosophy rather than the beauty of difference that exceeds a gendered binary.

a thing that is derided and lauded—depending on the speaker and intention—does "playing like a woman" offer any improvement? If "playing like a girl" is full of rhetorical ambivalence, can feminists benefit by claiming the phrase "play like a woman" to address issues of the life cycle?

The difficulty with this phrase, in part, is because play as an adult (regardless of gender identity) gets complicated. Adult play becomes muddled in other tasks. The activities that we once may have thought of as playful, the physical activities that we once partook in on a playground, frequently grow tedious with age. A jump rope might sound like a fun way to play when you are seven, but at forty-seven it is another matter entirely. For many adults, the activities that we once saw as fun rapidly become obligatory by middle age.[t] Exercise, in turn, ceases to be expressive, and becomes a mandatory means of maintaining health and well-being. In other words, for a lot of people what once was play becomes a form of work. This is not only the case for playing like a woman but also more generally the situation when "playing like an adult."

This is, of course, not the case for all adults or all women. Many women continue to play on sports teams and engage in athletics as a form of fun well beyond childhood. But the practices are so diffuse and problematized by the other complexities of middle age and beyond (flexibility, endurance, arthritis, families, time, and so on) that there is no clear image for what playing like a woman might look like. Yet the politics of aging as a woman also necessarily implies what Kathleen Hall Jamieson

t. Returning to Ruberg's premise mentioned earlier in this chapter, perhaps this pursuit of fun is a false narrative unto itself.

refers to as a "double bind": a culture of widespread traps that "forcefully curtail" options, thereby creating a setup for no-win situations.[13] One such double bind, according to Jamieson, is that of "aging/invisibility," wherein the inevitability of growing older contrasts sharply with the decreased visibility that women have in society. Play is part of this aged invisibility of the double bind: while we continue to need play throughout our lives, getting older renders play as seemingly noncompulsory. Playing like a woman, then, is a phrase that might imply that as we get older, our desire for play all but disappears.

An additional problem with the idea of "playing like a woman" is an intersectional one. If we are encouraging individuals to play like a woman, we need to ask who counts as a woman. More specifically, given the fluidity of gender identity and awareness of trans bodies, the phrase "play like a woman" can quickly become exclusive. The #LikeAGirl campaign advocates playing like a girl, but the gender normative implications of the commercial infer that to play, run, and throw like a girl is attached to the biology of womanhood. The advertisement is selling sanitary pads and thus is inextricably attached to the menstrual cycle. So if we are advocating that one should play like a woman, we must be mindful that womanhood is bound up with bodies, and those bodies might be in transition, menopausal, queered, or othered in any number of ways. If we are to advocate for an equality of play, we must move beyond the limited categories of womanhood.

To this end, womanhood (even cisgendered womanhood) is full of physical predicaments that can inhibit everyday play. Many of our weights fluctuate wildly, and our flexibilities are less than they once were. Those of us who have engaged in childbirth have had to remap our centers of gravity. Those on the other

side of menopause must reconcile ourselves with both changed bodies and changed social status.[u] And of course, as the Always brand implies but never overtly states, playing like a woman often means competing with the internal pains of menstruation. Womanhood sounds exhausting, particularly when thinking of play entirely in terms of these physical manifestations. If play is going to be more equal—if we are to move beyond playing like girls—we need a better vehicle for advocacy than to "play like a woman."

Enter Feminism

Feminism is central to the play that I advocate for in this book. It is at the core of how we question the premise of playing like a girl or woman. As a philosophical perspective, feminism has been repeatedly misrepresented, maligned, and threatened.[v] It is easy to define feminism by the specifics of historical social movements (first wave, second wave, and postfeminism), but these things lack global and intersectional outlooks, and tend

u. As historian Susan Mattern argues, we should move away from thinking of menopause as a question of hormones and "abnormal." Menopause, as she puts it, is a normal evolution of human existence, and we must find ways of removing the othering that is so often associated with this life phase. See Susan Mattern, *The Slow Moon Climbs: The Science, History, and Meaning of Menopause* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

v. Hopefully I have not lost readers who are dubious about feminism. While there are many folks suggesting that feminism is a movement meant to exclude men (not true!), I hope that you will read the following section with an open mind. Feminism is not misandry.

toward what could be referred to as "white feminism." The feminist perspectives on play and games that I advocate for in this book do not focus on these waves.[w] In our current (global) political moment, it is necessary to deploy feminisms that continue to unify our mutual desires for equality, pushing us apart. Given the growing number of antifeminist movements—including men's right groups, "incel," and the alt-right—it becomes increasingly important to think about the plurality of feminisms in terms of our broader commonalities rather than defined by our differences.[x]

In our current political climate—and again, I mean this on a global level—feminisms have been decontextualized and used as a slur—as an anticonservative stance that has had a negative impact on those whose goal is to fight against sexism. In her book *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay writes, "Feminism, as of late, has suffered from a certain guilt by association because we conflate feminism with women who advocate feminism as part of their personal brand."[14] Certainly there is some truth to this sentiment; it is necessary to not confuse the branding, presentation, and work of those who advocate for a cause with the actual cause itself. If we are being honest, however, much of that conflation as well as the negative press for visible and branded feminists have come from political extremists, hotly arguing that feminism is destroying young minds and speaking of "social justice"

w. Briefly, when feminists talk of "waves," they typically are referring to periods of time that focus on a specific zeitgeist of feminist thinking.
x. The term "incel" refers to a movement of "involuntary celibates"—men who define themselves by a desire (and inability) to find partners for intercourse, insisting that they are entitled to sex.

as though it were a kind of viral contagion instead of an attempt to improve equality in the world.[15]

So what do I mean when I talk about feminism throughout this book? The prolific feminist scholar bell hooks defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." To this end, hooks's definition gets to the core of an issue that is difficult to object to: the end of exploitation and oppression based on sex difference. She continues, "Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism."[16] This well-considered definition is the one held throughout this book. Thus it is worth considering what feminism is not: it is *not* a movement advocating that women are superior to men; it is one advocating for equality. Building on this, Ahmed contends, as quoted earlier, that "to live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable."[17] The goal of feminism, then, is one of disruption, realignment, and revisiting the so-called laws of the universe, set so firmly by patriarchies of the past. It creates opportunities to rethink things, and one of those things gets to be how we play.

The "we" here is a bit tricky since on the surface, it might sound as though I am referring solely to how women (and girls) play. But feminism is not only about women; it is a larger topic than that, and a feminism that focuses solely on women is one destined to misunderstand the bigger picture. Butler debates the political problematics of making women the subject of feminism. She asserts, "The juridical formation of language and

politics that represents women as 'the subject' of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics. And the very feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation."[18] Feminism is not about women; it is about equality and representational politics.

Feminisms, of course, should be thought of in the plural. There is not just one feminism but rather multiple groups, waves, and perspectives that form the whole of hooks's premise: that feminism is a social movement meant to eradicate sexism in all forms. We talk about feminism in the plural because—by the 1990s and beyond—different groups and individuals have distinct perspectives on the focus of feminist thought.[19] The plural of feminisms articulates both the ambiguities of a social movement and power of fracturing in order to tackle a large swath of issues, all relating to the same cause. The use of "feminisms" rather than a singular "feminism" helps to remind us that we should not make assumptions that each individual's version of "feminism" should speak for the whole of people who consider themselves "feminists." It's useful to remember that the "waves" signify strict boundaries toward generational feminists, and as game studies scholars Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher note, there are "radical potentialities" within rupturing intergenerational perspectives and transforming those moments into their deeper intersectional potential.[20]

Feminisms are in the plural, and the feminism I articulate in this book is my own vision of a feminist future. To me, play becomes a persuasive way to rethink where we are right now, as feminists, and what we can become. As Gay writes, "Let us (try to) become the feminists we would like to see moving through

the world."[21y] To this end, the feminism I would like to see is a playful one that both advocates for play and immerses itself within a philosophy of play.

Playing like a Feminist

I am here to play like a feminist. I am too old to play like a girl, and I do not like the baggage that comes with that phrase. "Playing like a woman" is no better. The phrase seems to carry less meaning and more ambiguities. It is exclusionary, and does not address the power and potential of play.[z] We need to play like feminists. Why? Because play is an ideal space for changing minds and bodies, and disrupting patriarchal hegemonies. Playing like a feminist exceeds the boundaries of gender, yet still advocates for gender equality. It is a new way to think about how humans play, but also a new way to think about how feminists do their "feministing." Play needs to be treated like a feminist activity. And feministing needs to be regarded as a kind of play.

Until now, I've resisted explicitly defining play. Many have speculated on the meaning of play, particularly since the 1950s in sociology and more recently in video game studies.[22] The definition that I like the best, however, and the one that adheres most closely to the play that I envision for feminists is from

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y. To the feminist skeptics that have stuck around until this point, I am going to—from here on out—assume that while you may not be planning to go on marches, you can agree on the basic premises of feminism that are outlined in this section. In short, I'm going to assume that you are on board with the idea of human equality.

z. Nor does it acknowledge the complexity of trans bodies.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*. They define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure."[23] This intertwining of freedom and rigidity allows the word "play" to be used in a variety of linguistic placements: the play of a carburetor, the play of musical instruments, wordplay, and game play, for example. Their definition neatly suggests an interplay between structure and freedom, and the successful navigation of these things lies between those boundaries. It implies that in order to play, you need rules to push back at to be part of a larger, functional (playful) mechanism.

A playful feminism is one that *plays into* a structural paradigm yet pushes at the boundaries of that structure. It is about the thing that feminisms have always been about: breaking down the societal and patriarchal set of rules, and redefining things. A playful feminism is about taking the games already out there—and by this I mean both actual games and the metaphoric games of protest—and reforming the boundary work created by these games. It addresses the messiness of play, but also its possibilities in the everyday aspect of our lives.

Playing like a feminist is a disruptive yet inclusive practice. We play like a feminist to both improve lives and think about protest differently. We play like a feminist when we retool the pleasures of play, creating powerful opportunities for players to experiment with identity and agency. We play like a feminist when we apply intersectional approaches to leisure disparities and help find playful opportunities for others. We play like a feminist when our play isn't just about white, cisgender, young, straight, abled, dexterous women; it is about play that aligns itself with a larger cause of leisurely freedom. We play like a feminist when we play as a genre of protest, eschewing dated stereotypes of both feminism and femininity. And as I argue later

in this book, we play like a feminist when we transform video game culture, forging a space within it for new kinds of games and gamers. We play like a feminist when we weave all these measures together to engage in radical play.

Playing like a Feminist is not about play for women in the strict sense of identities. It is mutable and comprehensive. It is about finding pathways to equal play in forms only limited by our imaginations.

We don't need to play like girls.

We don't need to play like women.

It is time to play like feminists.[aa]

aa. And perhaps it is even time for Grandma Wilcox to get a little bit of play.

2 PWNing Leisure

Play Is Not Frivolous; Leisure Is Important

The television show *Malcolm in the Middle* aired from 2000 to 2009, featuring a "normal" American family: white, heterosexual, struggling toward middle class, and overwhelmed by unruly children.[a] Lois, the matriarch, was often depicted as overworked and exhausted. In one episode, Lois at the supermarket checkout suddenly realizes that she has twenty-five minutes free. She is flabbergasted, regarding this "surplus" of free time responding with consternation and bewilderment. As the realization slowly dawns on her, a cashier asks what she is going to do with it. "I don't know . . . I don't know . . . ," she replies, pacing in the store, moving back and forth aimlessly through the security alarm at the entrance. What makes this moment even more poignant is that in the episode, her husband, Hal, is spending inordinate amounts of time and money building a LEGO-like utopia. Leisure is so alien to Lois that she is incapable of adopting it into her life; her husband is so subsumed with leisure that it has

a. Of course, the normalizing of these identity markers speaks mostly of the expected demographic of the show.

become a secondary existence. Yet notably, the episode never quite comments on this disconnect between Lois's and Hal's leisure practices; it is both a source of comedy yet normalized into everyday existence.

The episode alludes to a thing and never says it overtly. Leisure is complicated. It is riddled with inequalities, full of contradictions, and not always as fun and desirable as it is in our imaginations. What is most clear in the episode of *Malcolm in the Middle* is that in Western cultures, we talk about leisure differently for women than we do for men. Leisure for adult men is framed as freer, more allowable, and exploratory. Leisure, when we talk about it for women, is more structured, productive, and constrained.[b]

Leisure is knotty and deeply personal. As I sat down to revise this chapter for the millionth time, I called one of my closest friends, Amber, complaining about the labor of it. She laughed. "You always hate your life when you write about leisure," she told me. "Maybe you should stop writing about it." I paused. Amber had a point. As I continued to think about this for the next few days, I quibbled with myself. *Why do I hate to write about leisure*? The answer, plainly, is that I don't do leisure well. When I play games, I play them for work, or at least that's what I tell myself to justify the game play. When I'm spending leisure time with my family, I'm often fantasizing about getting work done. When I spend time doing work, I dream about doing leisure with my family. For years I did not do leisure on my own,

b. This is not to say that women categorically don't *do* leisure as much as men. Yet the episode is a good example of how we often talk and think about leisure in terms of gendered binaries.

although I've tried to change that recently by instituting what I refer to as preplanned "pajama days" and affixing them on my calendar, frequently months in advance.[c] I am getting better at it. But while my research tightly aligns with leisure, I certainly do not feel like an expert at it.

But what do I even mean by "leisure," and how is it different from play? To some extent, these things are equal parts of the same problem (or maybe the same solution). There are distinctions between the two, although they are subtle. Leisure scholars typically define their area of study either in comparison to work or else in terms of "leisure industries."[1] Leisure studies focuses on several areas of inquiry, although travel research and sports are common themes. For the most part, leisure can be understood in terms of a person's free time activities and the state of mind that goes with them.[2] So in many ways, leisure is similar to play but infers a slightly larger scope. Play is an activity done *in* leisure time. Play is a more specific, focused activity while leisure is a more generalized state of mind. Leisure, additionally, is typically used to describe adult recreation. Play, of course, is something that is characterized as a child's activity. Adult play and its relationship to leisure is a bit more diffuse, however, and the two become rapidly conflated. Play, and how I envision it in this book, is a specific actionable event. Play does not always lead to an end result (as one typically does when "playing a game"); such is the case for ludic activities such as "playing with dolls"

c. Rules of the pajama day: once they are scheduled, they are not allowed to be removed except in an emergency; I am not allowed to run errands or leave my home; I can watch, play, or do anything without judgment; and I am allowed to eat what I want, have wine at noon if I so choose, and take as many naps as I need.

or "playing pretend." At the same time, play is more specific and deliberate than leisure. Leisure is the time one must carve out in order to play more.

Play is not frivolous. It is important. As Johan Huizinga famously began in his foundational book *Homo Ludens*, "Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play."[3] Play, according to Huizinga, is a necessary function of life and happiness. To play is to shift modalities and approach life from a different perspective. A life without play is one lacking a distinct and undeniable pleasure. Yet as I illustrated with the *Malcolm in the Middle* example, we talk about play and leisure differently within gendered contexts.

Feminisms need to improve how we talk about play and leisure. If we improve our leisure time, if we make more space for leisure, we can do better at playing like feminists.[d] We need play in order to function better for a more fulfilled existence. The human experience necessitates play so that we can live our best possible lives. And in order to get to that play, we need leisure time. Yet if leisure time varies wildly for members of society based on gender, ethnicity, class, and other factors of exclusion, that means that some people are capable of being more fulfilled in their life experiences than others. This chapter is meant to unpack these complicated disparities and talk about ways to advocate for feminist leisure practices.

As I have already discussed, though, feminism is not just about women; it is about equality. In advocating for feminist

d. And as I argue later in the chapter, as feminists we need to fight for more play for more people.

leisure practices, this book is about more than just biological women's playtime. The focus of this chapter is on women specifically, however my goal is not to be dismissive about the leisure needs for men and nonbinary folks. My emphasis on women is a particularity of the reality that women historically have a difficult relationship with their leisure practices. This book, in part, is meant to address why it is of vital importance that feminists play more video games. Yet in order to play more games and get more engaged in the video game industry, we first need to rethink and reshape our expectations of leisure. Feminists advocating leisure, I argue, is the first step toward this goal.

What Is Feminist Leisure?

It's not only that women have a complicated relationship with leisure; feminism, too, has long had a difficult time advocating for leisure equality. After all, how does a social movement factor something as frivolous as leisure into an important and actionable topic? While feminism can easily advocate for the value of equality in the workplace, education, domestic sphere, human trafficking, health care, and global forms of oppression, leisure seems to be prioritized as less vital to the progress of achieving global equality. These things are complicated, of course. Feminist advocates often talk about the value of self-care, but rarely overtly promote deliberate leisure. For instance, Ahmed writes that feminists not only use time productively but also take time out. This idea of "time out" is nebulous. Ahmed does not explicitly recommend specific leisure activities but instead asserts that feminists should "take breaks; do other things, with things. Time out might be required for time in."[4] To be clear, this is excellent advice; advocacy for self-care is something many need to hear.

Yet it also does not go far enough. Mahli-Ann Butt argues that the rhetoric of self-care can be "critiqued as a biopolitical extension of institutional powers into the governmentality of the everyday private lives of workers; disciplining workers to self-govern their wellbeing for the productivity of the industry."[5] In other words, self-care suggests that we are all responsible for self-healing in difficult situations, rather than expecting industrial forces to look at toxic practices in workplaces and elsewhere. While the acts may be helpful, according to Butt, they suggest the onus of labor rests on the person in need versus on the poor institutional reckoning that creates the need for self-care in the first place.[e]

To address the complicated relationships between women, feminism, and leisure, the area of inquiry of "feminist leisure studies" took shape by the mid- to late 1980s. To date, there has been a moderate amount of research on gender and leisure—primarily how leisure activities reinforce gender disparities.[6] Many in the field have discovered that leisure—particularly leisure at home—is a difficult thing to map, often because women have more responsibilities in domestic spaces than men do. While many men find the home a place for relaxation and leisure separate from work, women are frequently unable to have the same kinds of unconditional leisure that men have in these spaces.[7] Thus there is often a conflation of work activities and leisure activities.

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e. This leads me to wonder, Are my "pajama days" self-care or leisure? On the one hand, if I'm getting what I need it doesn't matter. On the other hand, I might need new pajamas to represent the "biopolitical extensions of institutional powers," as I'm not sure that my favorite *Harry Potter* pajamas effectively convey this.

Leisure needs to be an important aspect of feminist work. Leisure activities are vital as they create spaces for freedoms and a kind of resistance to social structures. Betsy Wearing refers to women's leisure as a "heterotopia" or "personal space for resistance to domination, a space where there is room for the self to expand beyond what it is told it should be."[8] In other words, feminists can use leisure spaces to learn more about themselves beyond the structuralist constraints put forth by living in a patriarchy. This idea of using leisure as an act of resistance is a consistent theme throughout feminist leisure studies, where women claim space in competitive sports, motorcycling, and girlfriend getaways.[9] The creation of these heterotopias, in short, grants freedom from the daily grind.

Feminist leisure studies was designed from a place of both research and advocacy. Things have changed—in a variety of ways, both positive and negative—over the subsequent decades. While women's roles in domestic spheres have shifted considerably and legislation such as Title IX has made space for increased opportunities, there are still the lived realities of cultural expectations. Feminist leisure studies quite effectively has documented unequal leisure, but it is often difficult to actually arrive at actionable practices out of this research.[10] In turn, many disparities remain.

When I talk to people about their leisure—and I find that I do that quite frequently—the word "productivity" typically comes up. In her 1986 study on women and leisure, *All Work and No Play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure*, Rosemary Deem asserts that women's leisure tends toward productivity.[11] In other words, a lot of women's activities are about making things, bettering oneself, and other lofty goals. And so I must constantly ask (myself and others), Does productivity negate the usefulness of

leisure? If one is being productive, say, knitting a scarf or gardening, does it cease to be a leisure activity because of the focus on a usable end product? Does that make the leisure somehow less meaningful? I would argue no, but with a caveat. Regardless of its relationship to productivity, for something to be leisure it must be *noncompulsory*. Once an activity is obligatory, it edges toward the scope of labor. These boundaries are flexible and personal, however. Leisure to one person is labor to another, and vice versa.

When I talk about advocating for feminist leisure in general (and women's leisure in particular), I'm unconcerned with the specificities. Find the thing you love to do, that is untethered to work, and do it. Read a novel. Go for a hike. Ride a horse. Play a sport. Fly a kite. Knit or sew. Go dancing. Play a video game. Fit it into your life in small snippets between projects or long sprawling days of hedonistic pleasure. Take a pajama day. This project is not meant to critique the kind of leisure a person takes, only to suggest that they take leisure that is quality, enjoyable, and something that can fit into their lives regularly and unapologetically. Of course it's easy to paint in broad strokes, and more difficult to acknowledge that disparities are nuanced and often thorny. Some women take a lot of leisure time; others do not. Some men do not advocate for leisure in their own lives. Nonbinary and gender-fluid individuals all have their own, likely nuanced relationships with leisure (as do we all). Feminist advocates need to start speaking louder for the necessity of leisure in the everyday practices of *all* people, as part of a broader path toward equality.

It's about Time

The problem, of course, is always time. Time is the one thing that we need in order to properly take on any leisure activity.

And time is the thing that many scholars agree is largely lacking in the majority of women's lives. Many women do not take enough time for themselves—to explore, play, and find games, activities, and lifestyles that are separate from work and also identity forming. Why? Because the time of other things is constantly encroaching. Women with families are dominated by the expectations of domestic care. Women in their jobs and careers typically earn less and work more, leaving little time for leisure. On top of this, there are cultural expectations regarding how women *should* spend their time, with gatekeepers defining what activities are appropriate and what lifestyles fit into the cultural milieu of how we think about femininity. It's always about time, and women's time is necessarily bound up in larger gendered discourses.

There are specific patterns regarding how Western women think about their leisure time.[f] Deem argues that women's leisure activities typically are those that can be done in short chunks of time, are cheap or free, and can easily be started and stopped. As an example, she talks about leisure activities such as reading and fiber arts.[12] Similarly, Arlie Russell Hochschild maintains that women's time is structured in a way that necessarily keeps work and domestic spheres in contest.[13] Within all this, there is not a lot of temporal space for leisure.

In our current moment, mobile devices have created both allowances for and restructured how we think about time.

f. I am resisting making generalizations that are global and for the most part focusing on how leisure is enacted in Western contexts. My research by and large has a cultural bias toward US and Western cultures. I welcome future studies that consider feminist leisure practices in Eastern cultures and the Global South.

Living in the era of smartphones and devices gives us the power to have more leisure activities closer at hand. Regardless of the specifics—if that leisure is explicitly video games, social media, or other kinds of quickly spun playful activities—we have more access to play than ever before. Yet that leisure also tethers us to other people's technological structures, which can create unintended consequences. Cell phone leisure is by no means ideal; it encourages data mining and contributes to environmental waste, for example.[g] Additionally, there are unquestionably issues that we need to address more broadly about how mobile games have been used in the past to surveil us.[14] But they embody the *possibility* of finding forms of leisure not tied to the temporal structures of our everyday existence. What smartphones offer us is leisure that escapes the binding temporalities of real-world obligations.[h]

With the word "temporalities" here, I am invoking Sarah Sharma's use from her book *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Sharma's use of "temporalities" is meant to evoke "lived time," which is intended as a response to the "differential economy" that shapes time for groups and individuals. The goal of Sharma's argument is to create more temporal awareness of how our desire to manage time effects the larger social fabric,

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g. This leads me to wonder what kinds of sustainable objects we can invent that provide the ready-made leisure that mobile devices can, while not contributing to the destruction of our planet.

h. Yet they also bind us to those very obligations. In the past when we had multiple devices that each held a specific purpose, we could compartmentalize better. Now, if I am playing a game on my smartphone and a work email pops up, I feel obligated to stop playing. This, perhaps, is a benefit of older mobile gaming systems such as the Nintendo DS series.

freeing us from thinking about how we think about time. She concludes that a temporal perspective "reimagines time, not as being singularly yours or mine for the taking but as uncompromisingly tethered and collective."[15] Of course this would require broader changes, such as a more equitable distribution of labor. Yet thinking about leisure in terms of temporalities can get us a bit closer to the core of the problem.

It is all about time. The long-standing inequalities surrounding how we think about who gets leisure and how much they get are all bound up in these questions of other people's time. In the *Malcolm in the Middle* episode that began this chapter, Lois's leisure is not only tethered to her husband's but that of all the other characters in the story too.[i] By shifting away from just "time" and toward Sharma's temporal perspective, there is a way to think about leisure differently: it can be more egalitarian and freer.[j] Moving beyond the constraints of limited conceptions of time that do not factor in social fabrics as well as institutional structures and behaviors, temporalities remind us that time is relative and subjective. In order to make time for ourselves, we must make time for others. In short, temporalities of leisure must not be treated as a zero-sum game. They should instead be cooperative and progressive. Many may not have enough time for leisure, however we can design technologies (digital or

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i. Everyone internal to the story, of course, has or does not have ample leisure time. Just as Lois paces through the store, her counterpart, the woman working at the register, does not even have the time to aimlessly wander during her work.

j. Again, even though Sharma would probably position this more broadly in terms of the equitable distribution of labor, it is worth meditating on the leisure portion of this argument.

otherwise) that help to loosen the boundaries of how we think about time.[k]

Intersectional Elephants

Of course, there is an elephant in the room when we talk about leisure. Obviously "women" is not a singular construct, and the lived experiences of women—and the identities that comprise them—are nuanced and interconnected, creating disadvantages for some and not for others. Until this point, my argument that feminism needs to care more about leisure was directed at women as though "women" live in a vacuum devoid of all other identity markers. The problem is that a lot of factors beyond gender identity effect leisure inequalities. Here I am speaking of the intersectional issues inherent in leisure distribution.

As I noted in the introduction to this book, intersectionality is a term originally used by Crenshaw to express the interplay of oppressive systems within culture.[16] In short, while women, in the generalizable sense of it, might face certain kinds of injustices, it is impossible to consider issues of gender inequalities without also factoring in other inequalities such as ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and disability. In thinking about feminism in intersectional ways, we are able to account for broader systems of injustice and not make assumptions about "women," assuming that all women's experiences are identical or equally unjust.

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k. In other words, anxiety-filled rhetoric about robots taking over our work should be rethought, in whole. If robots take away menial work, how might we use that added time to rethink the importance of leisure in all our lives, and value our work as much as we do our leisure.

So while it is easy to make blanket statements about the importance of feminisms advocating for leisure in everyday lives, it is essential to remember that we aren't only fighting for the leisure of white, middle-class people. By acknowledging other issues regarding who gets leisure and what that leisure looks like, and creating an intersectional perspective on the value of play, we can become better advocates. Up until this point, I have contended that feminists need to take leisure more seriously as a thing to fight for, among our arguments for work, health, education, families, and other markers of freedom. It is no good asserting that feminisms need more play, but then ignoring intersectional concerns.[l] We need to fight for better leisure for all. In other words, fighting for leisure for those around me does not negate my own ability to have enjoyable leisure.

Social class is perhaps one of the largest parts of this equation. As I suggested in the previous section, leisure implies time. And that time—free time—indicates a certain amount of class distinction. Thorstein Veblen first coined the term "leisure class" to signify the economic ruling class, which he argues takes more part in consumption than in production.[17] The "leisure class" per Veblen implies a group that focuses on consumptive practice, above the lower and middle classes. While the term "leisure" is rarely still used to denote class distinction, there is an underlying implication here: leisure is only available to those who can afford it.

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l. Access, too, is part of this equation. Even the simplest forms of leisure require resources. For example, while taking up running might be a free pastime, in order to do it well, you need good sneakers, gear, money for races, and safe places to run.

Time, as the old adage goes, is money. When we think of leisure activities or consumptive leisure practices, it is difficult to disentangle those actions from the conceit that only some of us can afford that time. In prescribing leisure as a feminist necessity, we must acknowledge that a wealthy person will likely have more time to spend on leisure than a poor one. This stands to reason. If someone is working three jobs to make ends meet, and dealing with childcare and domestic obligations, it is difficult to imagine how that person can squeeze better leisure into her life. We need to more effectively consider how to make pockets of time for leisure—not just for ourselves, but for those who do not necessarily have that time already allotted.

There are also expenses attached to leisure activities that exceed temporal boundary making. In advocating for leisure that goes beyond the leisure class, there needs to be a consideration of the cost of leisure activities—and the boundary making that is implied by that cost. Most pastimes of pleasure cost money; sports, vacations, gaming, and other forms of organized relaxation are rarely free. These things are not frivolous. If quality of life is involved, we need to think about the importance of positive and productive leisure experiences for those who cannot afford them.

Social class and wealth are crucial indicators of the quality of a person's leisure, but thinking about leisure under the framework of intersectional feminism goes beyond those things as well. There are other factors we cannot ignore when talking about who is permitted to have leisure. Ethnicity, for one, is often conflated with social class, making leisure not only less accessible but also less studied within marginalized groups.[18] Disability, too, is an identity marker that makes leisure more difficult, more

distant, and less accessible to some than to others.[m] Finally, feminist leisure needs to be globally concerned, not only regionally or nationally interested. While it is easy to advocate for leisure in our immediate communities, it should not be at the expense of poorer regions.

The expansion of leisure technologies—games but also other forms of digital leisure—creates opportunities but also new potential fissures. These technologies construct pockets of time and play where they had not previously existed. For instance, for a busy person who is unable to fit leisure into their everyday lives, taking ten minutes between other obligations is still something to covet, even if it is not a lot. Mobile devices increasingly allow for this portability and flexibility of time. Yet these devices and technologies are often cost prohibitive, making their purchase a far-fetched idea for some. Less expensive versions frequently are made at the expense of sweatshops around the world. In other words, cheaper leisure might come at the expense of someone else's leisure. As we continue to see these technologies develop, we need to find ways to offer forms of everyday leisure that are cost effective as well as make the time and space to advocate for them in sustainable ways.

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m. In her book *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), Elizabeth Ellcessor points out that access to frivolity for disabled persons is and should be an important activist concern.

PWNing Leisure

Feminists need to fight for leisure. It is not enough to fight for serious matters like health care, work, and safety. Freedom and equality mean a better quality of life for all. Bodies at play live better and more fulfilled lives. The concern for a leisure-filled feminism is not one of frivolity; it is of dire importance. Of course, endorsing leisure for those who do not have it (or do not have enough of it) does not mean taking away leisure from those who do. Playing like a feminist is about making better leisure for all. Our job is in enabling leisure—for ourselves and others.

To this end, it is time for feminists to PWN our leisure.[n] The term "PWN" is video game leetspeak, implying a kind of agonistic play. PWN is a word used in gamer culture as a shorthand for domination.[o] It can be used aggressively ("I PWNED YOU") or self-deprecatingly ("We got PWNED"), but indicates a win and a kind of domination within a playful space. To PWN is about resolutely finding a path and achieving victory. It is about taking control of a situation you did not previously control and forcing an epic win.

And so I am proposing that feminism not only take notice of leisure, not only fight for leisure; *I am arguing that feminism needs to PWN leisure*. How do we PWN leisure? Here are five steps that we can take on individual, community, and organizational levels to do a better job at PWNing our leisure.

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n. PWN is pronounced "pone."

o. "Leetspeak" refers to gamer lingo used in gaming communities, often using combinations of ASCII characters to replace letters with numbers. Some leetspeaks were popularized because of typos, others for quick shorthand, while others have been used to avoid forum administrators—such as, for example, "n00b" in place of "newbie" or "new player."

1. Beyond Self-Care, Embrace Meaningful Play

   There is certainly nothing wrong with a feminism that embraces the importance and value of self-care. "Self-care" is a term that typically refers to finding ways to emotionally and physically maintain your health. Advocates of self-care want us to remember to take time out and embrace "me time," nourishing the body or soul. Self-care is good. It is important. But it is also lacking the deliberate and focused potential of play and leisure activities. It creates a neoliberal fissure that offsets corporate responsibility for toxic environments and places them back on the individual.

   In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman refer to "meaningful play" as the relationship between game play and outcome. Their work, geared primarily toward game designers, considers how players, games, and actions must be "discernable and integrated" within the context of a game in order for that game to achieve "meaningful play."[19] Pushing the idea beyond the purpose of game design, it is useful to consider how meaningful play can be a goal of the leisure we PWN. My premise here is that we need to find forms of play that are both meaningful within the context of the game and integrated into our larger discourse. A feminism that embraces meaningful play advocates for leisure that functions both at a personal level, fulfilling self-care, and a broader level of cultural meaning. By moving beyond advocating simply for self-care, toward promoting meaningful play, feminisms can PWN leisure.

2. Be a Leisure Advocate

   We must take better leisure for ourselves. Our self-work needs to go beyond self-care and find ways to advocate for more deliberately playful activities. Yet we cannot stop at ourselves.

PWNing leisure means finding ways to advocate for the leisure of others. Intersectional perspectives on leisure activities have taught us that multiple systems of oppression often work together to make playtime less accessible for some than for others.

Leisure equality means thinking about the quality of other people's leisure. This implies working at both personal and organizational levels to be leisure advocates. Ask questions. Find out who in your personal spheres do not have quality leisure. For those who want better leisure, help them find the time and space to make this happen. On a community level, we need more organizational work to help people find affordable leisure in their lives. Community work and activities create vast opportunities at the local level for outreach, games, and play. Thinking creatively about advocating for leisure might mean creating and donating to community action networks that are leisure focused, particularly for marginalized groups.

Feminism must PWN leisure better. But that leisure cannot and should not occur on the backs of others. Being a leisure advocate means being thoughtful of sustainability. At a global level, we need to find ways to support leisure that does not create abusive situations for some in order to have free play for others.

3. Leisure Temporality over Leisure Time

To PWN our leisure means to think about our time differently. Time is central to leisure quality. But what about those of us who feel like we don't have time for play? For this I find it useful to think of Sharma's temporalities to describe lived time in order to acknowledge how we need to work collectively to enable time on a cultural level. If our time management

on an individual level effects the social fabric, then we must work together to construct more satisfying leisured temporalities. In this we can see that enabling leisure time for others is also enabling leisure time for ourselves. Leisure time should not be viewed in zero-sum terms, because the struggle for our own fulfilling play is only as successful as those who are disempowered and unable to make time for play.

4. Play All the Things

   Simply put, we need to get over personal hang-ups. Some of us have anxieties about sports. Some of us might feel anxious about video games. Others might not be sure about board games. But PWNing leisure means trying new things, pushing our bodies and experimenting with play that might (initially) make us uncomfortable. The first step of PWNing anything is to try, push, or force our way into a space that we might not think we will be successful at first. Failure is part of the process, and failing a game is not the same as failing at leisure. We might, as it happens, get PWNed in the short term. In the longer term, however, it is this experimentation that can be the most fulfilling.

   In other words, just because you think you don't like video games doesn't mean it is true. After all, there are a lot of different kinds of games, and you might be surprised by what you like. Just because you failed at sports as a child doesn't mean you won't have fun on an adult team.[p] Trying out totally new forms of play and leisure is a kind of growth that we rarely find in adulthood. In order to PWN leisure, we must embrace failure and discomfort in the short term.

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p. I am speaking to myself in this note.

5. PWN the Game

   Finally, PWNing leisure means that feminists need to do a better job of PWNing the game. Do you think that video games are "too sexist"? Fine. Make better ones. Do you worry about the violence and injuries in athletics? Make new rules. Social movements are about changing existing structures and bending other people's ideological rule sets. In order to PWN leisure better, feminists need to dedicate more energy toward changing the system. Make new forms of play and new kinds of games. Find ways to fix the games that already exist and make them better. If we merely critique from a distance, we are missing out on the pleasures of play. By getting up close, analyzing the problem, and scoping out solutions, feminists get to win the game.

These five steps demonstrate that PWNing leisure means moving beyond leisure as a solely selfish and personal activity. Certainly, leisure can (and should) be both personal and selfish at times. But feminist leisure practices also need to exceed the self and look toward better play within humanity. If play is a core human function, then a feminism that addresses the value of play and leisure is one that looks to improving the lives of others.

3 Play to Protest

I Do Protest

Starting in around sixth grade, I became mildly obsessed with the 1960s and the idea of social protest. A child of the 1980s—now a resolute Gen Xer—I didn't really understand the complexities of the 1960s, yet had a utopian vision based on old photos of marches, the fury of protest music, and the simplicity of peace symbology. More than the actuality of it, I was infatuated with the zeitgeist of the late 1960s, not the lived realities of the pain and anger that necessitated protest. I wanted this kind of fight in my life.

My most notable attempt at public protest happened in high school when 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* was released and subsequently banned from several retail establishments. This spoke to me. I knew nothing—NOTHING—of 2 Live Crew's music, but I knew that I was all in on a free speech debate. I gathered a few friends and announced my plan to protest at Peaches, a local record store (I think it had banned the record, but who knows, really). That day, I stood in that parking lot with the four hapless friends I had recruited and angrily held my protest sign. Recently I asked these friends what they remember

about the protest. My friend Dan told me that he is pretty sure he spent some portion of it shopping at Peaches. Rachel, another friend, confirmed that my friends were not that into it.[a] Both concurred that we probably didn't last a full hour. Other than some car honks and a few suggestive comments (at least one from another friend I had invited), nothing changed.[b] Deflated and defeated, I went home. To this day, I still have not listened to *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* in its entirety.

There is no question that my protest was pathetic. Some of this was logistics. I was too young to tap into real infrastructure to get the word out, but also the lack of success in my protestations had a lot to do with the fact that I picked things to protest just to protest; the hill I chose to die on that day was unfamiliar and had no personal meaning to me. Further, my protest methods—this and previous attempts—were dull, unimaginative, and didn't engage others in particularly clever ways. I was looking for fights, but didn't know how to fight and—as a middle-class white girl—had only an inkling of an idea of injustice. In short, my protest lacked heart, creativity, and laughter.

I protested poorly, but a lot of us protest poorly. Ineffectiveness in protest is so pervasive, it is practically part of the genre. But I wonder what might have been a more effective means of protesting. How might I have engaged my peers and strangers if I had approached the problem differently? This chapter is about mobilizing play to engage in protest—particularly feminist protest—and why we need to think about play as vehicle toward

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a. Rachel told me, "Dan definitely did not *actually* protest."

b. The suggestive comments, I suppose, shouldn't have come as a surprise to me given the content of the album. But I had not actually listened to the album.

this end. It is partly advice that I wish I could give to my younger self, so eager for protest and so ill equipped to do so.

Killjoys Don't Play

The problem in some ways is that to protest means owning the identity of a "killjoy." Ahmed argues that being a killjoy is often a necessary part of being a feminist. In *The Promise of Happiness*, she describes the feminist killjoy as a character who "spoils" other people's happiness. Ahmed explains of the killjoy, "She is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness. In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of the bad feeling."[1] Ahmed carries this image of the killjoy feminist through her works, more recently writing, "A feminist killjoy is an affect alien. We are not made happy by the right things."[2] In other words, this image of the killjoy sits in direct contrast to happiness—both the happiness of the feminist herself and that of those around her.[c] Her role, per Ahmed, is to thrust herself into spaces that would otherwise be pleasant, inviting in the stark realities of oppression. She serves as a reminder to society that all things are not equal, and the happiness of some often comes at the expense of others.

Ahmed uses the term "killjoy" here in a way that suggests both the reputation and reality of feminisms. On the one hand,

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c. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga, too, references the spoilsport as a trespasser of rules whose role is to shatter the play-world. So, in this way the killjoy sits in contrast to the motives and purpose of play. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950).

the term is reminiscent of the neoconservative terminology of the 1990s. Pundits such as Rush Limbaugh took great pride in identifying women as "feminazis." "Killjoy," however, sits in a different linguistic position, removing the offensive fascist associations and replacing them with the core of the matter: feminists, in popular portrayals, *kill joy*. Yet Ahmed owns the term with pride, suggesting that killing joy is a necessary, useful part of becoming a feminist and maintaining feminist thought. Ahmed's work asserts that sometimes joy must be killed for a higher purpose.

To this end, it might seem initially difficult to reconcile playful feminisms with feminist killjoys. If the purpose of play is joy and pleasure (for the most part), and feminists are necessarily the killer of joy, then how might one both maintain the gravity of being a feminist killjoy and still find moments of play? In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed gestures at this in her "Killjoy Survival Strategy," remarking on the importance of humor and laughter in feminist life. She writes that "feminist laughter can lighten our loads" as a means of recognizing "the shared absurdity of this world."[3] This positioning of laughter as a necessary element of survival hints at something here: even killjoys need *some* joy.[d]

Feminist activism needs play. Because feminisms don't play. Feminisms work. And then work more. Feminist work is occupied with human rights—in homes and offices, with bodies and technology, and with health and politics. The feminisms of the past have all been inextricably entangled with these matters of gravity and importance. As such, there has been no playtime

d. Please mentally bookmark Ahmed's quote; later in this chapter I will unpack the value of "laughter as protest."

in feminism. And why should there be? Why would a series of serious social movements have time to concern themselves with feminine play or playful activism? But it is time for playful (and play-filled!) feminisms.

Being playful has power: it is infectious, unifying, and gratifying. Given this, play can be a tool; it can be a source of agency for feminists and activists. Rather than refuting the logic of the killjoy, a playful feminism is one that relies on the very tensions that undergird it. It is meant as a reminder to feminists to invite play into their everyday lives while simultaneously considering the value of play as a mode of protest. In this I envision a feminism of play that has two primary goals. First, a playful feminism can be an advocate for feminine leisure, discussed in the previous chapter. Second, I see play as a potential tool to ignite creative activism. While these two goals are distinct, they emerge from the same core: a desire to both locate and embrace feminist play as a step toward equality. And so while on the face of it, it might seem like killjoys don't play, this chapter is meant to argue the opposite. Feminist killjoys *can* play, they *should* play, and in playing better, they might improve both lifestyles and activist goals. Playing to protest, then, takes on two meanings: we must use play as a tool of protest and also think about how the act of playing is itself a form of feminist protest. We play to become fulfilled and give our voices more volume.

Playing as Protest

When I think back to my younger self, pouting in the Peaches parking lot, I wish I had found volume through playful protest. This protest was not a feminist one, though in retrospect it dealt with the inequalities of racially based censorship. My

protestations now are feminist and progressive, and those, too, could use a charge of play to facilitate that volume and laughter. Yet it is sometimes difficult to know how to get there. When we choose to protest, we are often so ensconced in anger that we lose scope of the value of play.

Historically speaking, feminisms have had a complicated relationship with play as both a lifestyle and tool of advocacy. If we are to approach feminism through the visage of Western feminism—in other words, regard feminism in terms of "waves" beginning with suffrage through modern categories such as "third wave" and "postfeminist"—play and leisure are topics that have been largely ignored.[e] Early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft seemed to be fighting against the reputation that women are "a swarm of ephemeron triflers."[4] By the US first wave of feminism, the focus became serious with the right to vote, thus creating a public voice for women as the central cause. Subsequently, as the first wave moved toward the second wave, new issues of importance dominated feminist rhetoric; equal pay, health care, bodily autonomy, and violence against women became the core talking points in the 1960s through the 1980s. In these historical feminisms, play was not a pivotal fight. As feminisms in the 1980s and 1990s began to fracture, acquiring labels such as "third-wave feminism" and "postfeminism" (terms meaning vastly different things to different people), the causes became more diffuse yet remained within the scope of

e. Earlier in this book, I cited Harvey and Fisher's smart objections to thinking about feminist "waves" over larger intersectional issues. I stand by this, yet historically we need to use waves in order to acknowledge the self-identification of specific eras.

seriousness. Delving into feminisms that are significantly less white—the works of transnational feminists and women of color—does not further push at this question of play. Play is absent from most core works of feminist theory and advocacy.

Beyond even protest, theories about play are lacking from most academic discussions outside game studies scholarship. Aaron Trammell and Anne Gilbert have noted that media and cultural studies would be well served to cross this disciplinary divide to think of more media as games, not games as a subset of media. In turn, their work theorizes ways to consider play "by what it leaves behind and what it pushes ahead of itself."[5] Play is powerful in both protest and scholarly activities because it helps to reform the world around us as well as rethink activities we have previously ascribed to mundanity. To this end, scholarly areas such as women's and feminist studies—a large influence on feminist activism—can benefit from thinking more about play.

Why would this matter? It seems only fair to ask how something as serious as feminism—or any activist cause, for that matter—can benefit from more playfulness. After all, wouldn't play and frivolity potentially only play down the seriousness of a cause? Feminists need to advocate for freedom of play, because play is a quality-of-life issue. To assume that only the wealthiest, whitest, or men get to have free-form leisure time in their lives is to neglect what is most salient about human existence. Feminists need to advocate for an equality of play that transcends the boundaries of identity politics and gets at the reality that everyone deserves a life filled with joy.

But even beyond a question of advocacy, play has power that exceeds the issue of fulfilled everyday lives; it reimagines the boundaries of society. In chapter 1, I used Salen and

Zimmerman's definition of play: "free movement within a more rigid structure."[6] If we were to consider the hegemonies and patriarchies of global oppression, it would seem that this definition of play (the notion of getting to move about freely) is precisely what feminist activists hope to gain. Salen and Zimmerman's definition therefore becomes particularly useful when play is combined with activism. In essence, play spaces can become staging areas for activism. Historically, feminist activism—as well as other forms of progressive activism—have toyed with the possibilities of playful protest, but have not fully vested its power as a primary tactic to both create awareness and engage others.

This idea transcends feminisms; regardless of whether or not you identify as a feminist, the use of play as a form of protest is one that can galvanize others and demonstrate the power of community building. Yet this is not new. It has been done before—perhaps not frequently, but playful protest is the protest always discussed after the fact. Sure, people can show up to a protest, but it is the play of activism that is remembered.

Some second-wave feminists of the 1960s scratched at this playful itch. In *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, Michael Oriard suggests that many feminists of this era were indeed deeply entwined in playful philosophies through "debates over sexuality and in a radical feminist utopian vision." He further remarks that "play can embody a number of radical feminist ideas: nonseparation from nature, rejection of domination, celebration of the female body and of intuition and feeling."[7] The most prominent example of this was delivered by the feminist group Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) in the late 1960s. At a 1969 bridal show in Madison Square Garden, WITCH famously

protested playfully, setting mice free, wearing black veils, and chanting "here come the slaves, off to their graves." Similar protests include the group's hex on Wall Street as well as a famous protest at the Miss America Pageant of 1969, where WITCH threw away objects of oppression in dramatic form.[8f]

Globally, protesters have occasionally used clever playful ploys to get noticed and galvanize interest. There is no example more memorable than the Yes Men, a culture-jamming group that began in the early 2000s. Among many other protesting hoaxes, the Yes Men famously pranked the World Trade Organization (WTO) by showing up to an event and speaking on the WTO's behalf, and then announcing a series of extreme pro-slavery positions in the name of corporate interest.[9] While the rhetoric itself was jarring, the accompanying antics helped to establish that this was not real; it was a kind of playful protest. The disconcerting nature of the Yes Men's prank got it eyeballs—the event was filmed—forcing viewers to think about, notice, and protest the actions of the actual WTO.[g]

Other instances of playful protest vary in scope and level of impact. These moments are striking illustrations of what playful protest could look like:

- The often-cited Barbie Liberation Organization was an excellent example of culture jamming. In 1993, the group replaced

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f. The counterpoint to WITCH from the late 1960s is Valerie Solanis's *SCUM Manifesto* (with "SCUM" standing for "Society for Cutting Up Men") and its rhetorical violence. Solanis—who was not a playful feminist—is infamous for shooting Andy Warhol the year of her manifesto's publication.

g. The Yes Men is still an active group. For more of its antics, see https://www.theyesmen.org.

voice boxes between Barbie Dolls and GI Joe action figures to protest the gendered stereotypes embedded in children's toys.[10]

- Ian Madrigal has shown up to US congressional hearings dressed as the patriarch from the board game Monopoly (frequently getting themselves into the background of photos) to point out the hypocrisies of late-stage capitalism.[11]
- Starting in 2003, and using a combination of protest and clowning techniques, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) developed a method that it referred to as "rebel clowning" in order to disorient and laugh at political enemies.[12]
- Similarly, in Columbia in 1995, a group protested corrupt traffic police by replacing them with mimes.[13]
- The Santa Claus Army was a group of santas who, in 1974, went on parade in Copenhagen and consequently took over the General Motors plant that had recently shut down.[14]
- Quebecois in 2001 used a teddy bear catapult to protest a trade agreement and summit, using the catapult as a tool of distraction.[15]
- The Miniskirt March in Zimbabwe in 2014 helped give voice to women against harassment.[16]

There are many other examples from around the world. Flash mobs can be deployed cleverly as a kind of distributed network that (figuratively) disarms and (hopefully) charms people into different perspectives. Craftivism seeks a similar route toward finding playful means of feminist intervention via activities that combine play and work with meaningful movement. Even the post-Trump "pussy hats" were drawn out of a playful desire to

both mock and commiserate in unity.[h] Craftivism is effective because it can function on personal and communal levels.

We can see from the above illustrations that while the specifics and results might vary, protest can use playfulness, joy, and laughter to combat things that are offensive, anger inducing, horrific, or otherwise worthy of protest. The power of playful protest is not only one of impact; it is one of explicit community building: a group of people playing together are as powerful as a group of people screaming together.

Beyond community building, playful protest is especially relevant to those in lower-down positions of power. For those who exist on the margins and lack cultural capital, the disruptive potential of play through humor is a safer space than trying to tear down a monolithic machine. Because playful protests still operate within the larger schema of social norms and cultural expectations, yet often call attention to those things, they can potentially create lower-risk opportunities for protesters.

And so I wonder, What might my protest for 2 Live Crew have looked like if it had been deployed creatively and playfully? Perhaps not as lackluster as it was. Using the seeds of what has worked in the past might have proved to be a useful playbook and gotten more attention. But what if I had taken it a bit further

h. A local (Athens, Georgia) case of craftivism that I am quite fond of occurred in early 2017 when two local women, Denise Domizi and Hilda Kurtz, went to festivals and community events asking strangers as well as friends to design fabric squares that expressed their feelings at that particular political and cultural moment. The squares of fabric were stitched together to form several large quilts, which were then put on display.

than that even? What if I had turned my protest into a kind of game itself? Looking to theories about play and games might provide some insight into specific ways I might have deployed a more active form of protest in the early 1990s.

Gaming Activism

Making protest fun by turning it into a game helps to change the parameters of how spectators are invited into its rhetoric and at the same time makes the process feel less laborious while decreasing the risk. When we think of games, we typically think of things done alone or small groups, but perhaps it serves us well to think more broadly about "game," turning our worlds into invitational, playable spaces. As Andrea Gunraj, Susana Ruiz, and Ashley York explain, "Game makers can design their work to identify and challenge society's everyday dynamics of oppression and privilege. They can inspire players to act in new ways to break down those dynamics and divides. They can illustrate what players can do to affect anti-oppressive change in the real world, allowing them to practice and share their strategies for change with each other."[17] Thinking about ways play can be and has been deployed more broadly underlines how radical play can become a transformative kind of protest.

The phrase "magic circle" is one that is often debated by game and play scholars. Salen and Zimmerman employ it in their book *Rules of Play*, loosely borrowing the concept from Huizinga. They describe the magic circle as a play space where a player is able to enter and subsequently work with different rules than that of everyday reality.[18] As Salen and Zimmerman explain it, "As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle

is like a clock; it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility."[19] Certainly there are parallels between a magic circle and the kind of protests described in the previous section. The magic circle is a space where participants are able to work with rules that are alternate to those they encounter in real life. By "stepping in" to the magic circle, the players are neither complying entirely with their own rules nor are they simply obeying the rules of a game; there is a tacit agreement with the other players (or themselves) that certain boundaries are to be maintained when existing in this alternate space.

This idea of the magic circle is not without rightful dispute. Notably, Mia Consalvo argues that there is a certain naivete in how the magic circle is deployed by game designers and game studies scholars.[20] Especially as it applies to digital media, Consalvo maintains that the magic circle metaphor is not really as useful as many give it credit for. She explains that while it upholds a structuralist vision of games, rules, and play, it ignores the context of actual game play. Certainly the magic circle takes us only so far, rules eventually apply in both the game and real world, and context *does* matter. Yet in deploying protest as a form of play, the idea of the magic circle to create a safe game space is tempting. Of course, there are still rules—a society's laws in particular—that limit the parameters of play. If play is done properly in a protest situation, though, it can both create an educational game space and force protesters to take notice of, critique, and reconsider the structuralist rules that bind us. Magic circles are by no means a perfect metaphor, but they do provide a way of thinking about radical play as protest.

So in this way, it behooves us to think about magic circles differently. While the concept is useful, it is best thought of when play is grand, public, and consuming, rather than when it is private and interior. Even more useful to the way that I'm invoking the term in this book, we can think of protest as what Cindy Poremba calls a kind of "brink game": a game that sits on the edge of the magic circle, interrogating the borders of what is forbidden, allowable, and a reality.[21] Protest as play can function as a critical practice of living on the brink to interrogate and marginalize the behaviors that live at the center of the magic circle. In their edited collection *Queerness in Games*, Todd Harper, Nick Taylor, and Meghan Blythe Adams deploy the concept of "possibility space" (again, cribbed from Salen and Zimmerman) as the idea that games have both freedom and restrictions to allow for "potential actions." They argue that "in both queerness and in games, the idea of boundless freedom is a mirage, but also for both there is meaning in exploring the possibilities that occur *within* the boundaries, especially when that exploration allows us to see the ways in which those boundaries can be tested, expanded, or reconfigured."[22] The same, I would contend, applies to protest via play. In our attempts to protest, we don't need small games; we need games that test the boundaries of reality and ideology to illustrate possibility as well as remind us of the artifice of everyday.

What we need are more pervasive games of protest. Pervasive games are those that expand the "contractual magical circle of play spatially, temporally, or socially."[23] In other words, they reimagine the boundaries of games in a way that forces the players to reconsider reality. This upending of reality is often used as a kind of pleasurable experience, such as in live-action role-playing games (LARPs), where people pretend to be in another

time and space, or giant scavenger hunts that turn an entire city into a game board.

One form of pervasive play is the alternate reality game (ARG). An ARG is a game played over a variable span of time (sometimes between weeks and months)—both online and in the real world—that uses the real world as a kind of game board. ARG players frequently solve a mystery, which typically involves cooperative work between individuals. An ARG often begins with a "rabbit hole" that invites players in, sometimes without knowing what they are being invited into, and uses real-world resources and connections to find locations, phone messages, objects, and people to solve a larger mystery.

Jane McGonigal argues that while the ARG by its nature shifts reality, it should be considered an "antiescapist game," asserting that "ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it."[24] While many ARGs have been part of marketing campaigns, this collaborative and social form of play is ripe with activist potential.[i] McGonigal has done some versions of activist ARGs, with varying degrees of success. Notably, her game *A World without Oil* forced players to rethink how they would live in a space with limited natural resources. Another one of her games, *EVOKE*, crowdsourced the world's global problems (hunger, poverty, and displacement) and had players crowdsource solutions. In other words, alternate realities can turn activism into play.

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i. As examples of marketing schemes, "ilovebees" was an ARG campaign for the video game *Halo 2*, and "Why So Serious?" was a campaign for the Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*. The entire Nine Inch Nails album *Year Zero* was itself an ARG.

Some feminist game designers have already begun pairing ARGs and game mechanics with clever activism. Alexandrina Agloro developed an activist ARG titled *The Resisters*. Like all ARGs, *The Resisters* begins with a rabbit hole: a young Latina woman living in the United States learns that her father was wrongfully taken by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), asks help of her audience.[j] While Agloro experienced frustrations with some of the outcomes of *The Resisters*, the final project demonstrates the possibilities of thinking through how ARGs might create civic engagement with diverse participants, and how scholars and game designers can think of new ways to engage audiences.[25] The work of Susana Ruiz, a game designer, artist, and activist, similarly uses playful ways to engage activist audiences via civic games that combine activism, education, and art. For example, the card game *A Question of Character* asks participants to engage in in-person play that aligns with the "Women and Girls Lead" initiative.[26] Much of the work that Ruiz has done personally and with teams specifically deploys mobile as well as locative games to involve people in "civic innovation."[27] Colleen Macklin's big urban game *Re:Activism* forces players to make ethical choices in a public game setting.[k] The game challenges players to reenact the activities of activism in the locations where they had originally occurred.[28]

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j. Arguably, there is no right reason for someone to be taken by ICE.

k. The concept of the "big urban game" was developed by Katie Salen as a way to engage players with specific urban environments to generate community. These games are locative, and often involve various degrees of real-time game mechanics, scavenger hunts, or generally playful activities.

Another model, while less activist in its conceits, is the Greatest Internet Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen (GISHWES). GISHWES is an annual event organized by actor Misha Collins.[1] He challenges people across the internet to do unlikely things, like getting them to make wedding dresses out of recycled paper, getting ice cream shops to make new flavors, or having a tea party with a special needs child dressed as a character from *Alice in Wonderland*. Proof of completion is offered by photo and video, and teams of participants are awarded points for their feats. While GISHWES is not overtly activist (or feminist), anyone can immediately see the potential of its pervasive play.

We need to be more strategic in how we protest. Standing with a sign at the corner of Sunrise Boulevard and Fifteenth Street in Fort Lauderdale was never going to get me more than honks and shouts. But had I turned it into an invitational game that rallied the support of fellow high schoolers, others may have taken notice. My protest was dry, pointless, and disconnected from my own identity. My protest failed because it lacked fun; it had no laughter.

The Lulz of Medusa

The physical act of laughter is the ultimate tool of playful protest. It does not require props, screens, or any affiliated costs. Laughter has the ability to disrupt the status quo, extricating stifling hypocrisies. It is always available, regardless of your

1. Collins is best known for his work as an angel on the long-running television show *Supernatural*.

position of power. It works as an antiseptic and is clarifying. It is personal. Laughter has been used and mobilized by those in the past, and needs to reclaim its role in the protestations of the future. Laughter is a striking tool of resistance. If deployed properly, we can giggle, guffaw, chuckle, and snicker toward resistance and advancement.

But how do we laugh in the face of the terrible things that happen—things that strike us so deeply that we are immobilized with fear? In these moments, our first response to protest is often one of anger and deliberate, obstinate resistance. How, then, do we add laughter to this resistance? When overwhelmed with sadness over the things we wish to protest, how do we locate the presence of mind to laugh without diminishing or undercutting our topic? When I set out to write this section of this chapter, it was October 27, 2018. I was in a hotel room in Vancouver, three hours behind my usual time. I had woken early to write, and the news erupted that eleven people had been murdered by a gunman in a Pittsburgh synagogue. *In the face of this, how do I laugh*? I put the chapter down for weeks, assuming the answer would come with distance; after all, this shooting was just one of many. In 2019 alone, the United States of America had 417 mass shootings. *How do I laugh*?

I laugh because laughter is power. Elizabeth Krefting refers to "charged humor": a form of disruptive laughter meant to reimagine communities and use comedy to "foment social change."[29] Krefting observes that in this way, laughter is an inroad toward social justice. Similarly, Joseph Boskin writes about the power of comedy to disrupt the momentary zeitgeist.[30] But he also suggests that political humor is often deployed ineffectively, and that rather than focusing on institutions, it tends to be directed at individuals.[31] In other words, the target of derisive laughter should not be the politician who makes a public misstep but

instead the political system that put that politician in power. This lack of institutional focus makes our laughter less effective as a weapon.

Nevertheless, laughter has been and can be weaponized. Charged humor, in addition to being a kind of communal glue, is personal and intimate. We can laugh in a crowded theater, to great satisfaction, but we can also laugh alone and unheard by others. Laughter can be deployed by the disenfranchised to reclaim their sense of the absurd world we live in while remaining a binding substance that can fortify relationships. *We need more laughter*.

Earlier I cited Ahmed's words in *Living a Feminist Life*, where she wrote that "feminist laughter can lighten our loads." Others before Ahmed suggested the use of laughter to reconsider how it can offset power. Famously, in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa," Hélène Cixous writes about the monstrous feminine as inhabited by the infamous mythological icon. Rather than casting her as a beast, Cixous reinterprets the character, noting, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and laughing."[32]

Medusa's laughter is rebellious; it fights back against the gods and mortals who have left her in her predicament, and it is our own fear that keeps us from hearing that laughter. It is Medusa's laugh that we need to model in an attempt to play like feminists. Our laughter needs to be binding yet personal, light yet serious, and it needs to attack the institutional structures that sit expressionless and immovable.

In order to find Medusa's laughter, perhaps we should reconsider it as a kind of lulz.[m] The term "lulz" was originally adopted

m. "Lulz" is leetspeak for "laugh out loud."

by internet trolls; Whitney Phillips defines it as "amusement at other people's distress."[33] This vision of lulz, unto itself, might seem categorically negative and nonproductive. Others have described it in not quite so deleterious terms; Jessica Beyer refers to it as "entertainment for entertainment's sake," which parses as far less nasty than implied by Phillips's definition.[34] Phillips further suggests that the actual deployment of lulz are necessarily fetishistic (they are decontextualized into exploitable details), generative (lulz beget more lulz), and magnetic (they create communities), altogether constructing an "emotional gap between those who laugh and that which is laughed at."[35] Lulz seem to teeter between these definitions that place them as mean in spirit and chaotically neutral. Yet they also have the capacity to build across communities and upend patriarchal structures. Amber Davisson argues that in internet culture, lulz have replaced ideology in order to create networks.[36] Internet trolls are not the only ones who can use lulz to these ends.

Lulz have indeed been used by anonymous internet trolls to disrupt the status quo of institutional structures. Famously, the multifaceted attacks on Scientology organized by Anonymous are a good representation of this kind of playful, lulzy, protesting behavior.[n] While the reputation of internet lulz tends to focus on the individual takedown, there are many examples of lulzworthy attacks on larger political systems, corporations,

n. In 2008, 4chan began a full-on attack of Scientology, dubbed Operation Chanology. It included a distributed denial-of-service attack, but also some more playfully lulzy activity. Operation Chanology also marks some of the earliest use of Guy Fawkes masks in on-site protests from those who were galvanized by the internet.

and organizations.[o] The magnetism and generative nature of lulz means that it becomes easy to turn the laughter of one into the lulz of many. While the fetishism of lulz removes context, this lack of context also allows for the faster spread of meme-like protest. Lulzing is not always out-loud laughter, but it is loud and powerful. Laughter is contained, but lulz can echo.

When I first read Cixous's writing about Medusa's laugh, I always had an image of a singular monstress, alone in her cave, laughing quietly to herself about the foolish men who came to claim her head. Medusa's laugh in this version seems solitary, lonely, and almost desperate. But if Medusa were to lol rather than laugh, she would gain the power of many. She would be able to stare down the internet, wreaking havoc with her laughter through networks. Medusa no longer sits in solitude; she uses her laughter to reclaim community, identity, and purpose. In this new version, I imagine Medusa typing furious tweets that mock the gods who abandoned her rather than just the humans who attacked her.[p]

How do I laugh? The answer is not laughter but rather the lulz of Medusa.

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o. For example, Adrienne Massanari demonstrates how the subreddit /r/TrollXChromosomes remixes the expected use of lulz to deploy sharp, feminist humor that pushes back against our usual expectations of reddit. See Adrienne Massanari, "'Come for the Period Comics. Stay for the Cultural Awareness': Reclaiming the Troll Identity through Feminist Humor on Reddit's /r/TrollXChromosomes," *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 19–37.

p. In my imagination, Medusa probably used Tumblr until Yahoo! bought it and then begrudgingly migrated the majority of her commentary to Twitter.

We live in dark times. Our natural resources are depleting. There is global unrest and abuse of power. Fascists and dictators reign around the world. While some have plenty, others go without basic needs to survive. There are too many guns owned by people who embrace hate as a part of their identities. We need to protest these things, but we need to do a better job at getting noticed, being heard, and evoking global change. To do this, it is time for feminists to find more room for play and laughter in the fight.

4 Gaming Feminism

On Destroying the Video Game Industry (and Dismantling Hegemonic Masculinity)

In 2015, I was briefly a target of GamerGate. My harassment was mostly limited to Twitter, a few emails, and a couple of poorly constructed, unintentionally hilarious YouTube videos.[a] The influx of mail to my in-box was all relatively benign and not nearly as violent as what some others (before and after me) have experienced. Yet what did happen was astounding to many scholars outside video game studies. I and some other academics involved in the Digital Games Research Association were accused of trying to destroy the video game industry and attempting to "dismantle hegemonic masculinity." We—those of us indicted by the alt-right of the internet—largely laughed at this accusation, culminating in an article I coauthored with Adrienne Shaw in which we dissected the absurdity of conspiracy theories and

a. At the time of this writing, one of the creators of said hilarious YouTube videos had recently lost an election as a UK Independence Party candidate for the European Parliament.

disputed the claim.[1] Many years later, I realize that perhaps I was wrong.

I would indeed like to destroy the video game industry, as it is currently known.[b]

I want to annihilate the toxic cultures, mediocre products, and public reputation of this industry. In turn, I would like to see a better industry making products for a larger audience. I want to see a mass scale of games that captivate, enrapture, and educate. I want to destroy the industry, disrupt the playground, and find ways to make games better. To do this, we need more feminists playing games, on the front lines of gaming culture, and making games. This does not need to be limited to digital games, although digital games are certainly a good target. Katherine Cross, for example, suggests that traditional role-playing games are tools that activists can use to carry out "the next stage of feminist storytelling."[2] Karen Schrier argues that playing video games can help with large-scale problem solving and motivation in ways that can *literally* help save the world.[3] Video games are a good start, but games in general are a perfect venue to start a revolution.

When I began this project, intersectional media scholar Kishonna Gray asked me point-blank why I would want to do this. "Why would you want to invite more women into the onslaught?" she asked. And that is a fair question. If video game culture is toxic, then why do we want to pull more people into

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b. My coauthor, Adrienne, actually thinks we need to dismantle late capitalism broadly, and the problems within videos games are just one small part of the fucking shitstorm of global politics, an unregulated tech sector, environmental devastation, hate-based movements, and so on, that characterize our particular historical moment.

that toxicity? My answer is that the only way to reconstruct this mass medium into one that is reasonable, ecumenical, diverse, and innovative is to overwhelm it with new kinds of consumers. Markets have power.[c] In facilitating a desire and audience for different kinds of gamers, the industry itself will be forced to transform. By demonstrating that women *do* want to play games—both games that are currently out there and ones not yet even conceived of—we get to force the industry to rethink what games get to be. If we construct this new market, I believe that the institution itself can be destroyed and then resurrected as a better one.

Video games are too often associated with masculinity. There are reasons for this, and masculine voices have long PWNed the output, boundaries, and culture of the video game industry.[d] The reasons, however, continue to weaken. As a medium in transition, games are bursting with opportunity to make change, protest the status quo, and improve the lives of players. In short, feminists need to enter the video game industry as players and creators. We are already here to some extent, and our voices need to get louder to foster even more diversity and use our market power to reframe the content of the industry. At the same time, as Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell warn, we need to be certain this process of opening things up does not fortify other preexisting disparities.[4]

Let me be clear: I am not arguing here that we ditch everything, throwing out babies and bathwater alike. I am not

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c. In a recent conversation with a French friend, he astutely pointed out to me that using capitalism as protest is a very American approach. Touché!

d. For a full explanation of the term "PWN," see chapter 2.

suggesting that we eradicate all games that are violent, competitive, or intended for primarily masculine audiences.[e] I am not saying that we should abandon the first-person shooter in favor of bubble shooters. I am, however, urging that we should rethink those games as occupying the central position of the industry. We can then begin to push beyond into an unknowable iteration of the medium that is dynamic, inclusive, and inevitably creates the astounding things many of us know it is capable of. But first we need to rethink how we got to our current state of video games.

Disrupting the Good Old Boys Playground

Many have written about the complex history and culture of video games, and the problematic connection between games and masculinity. In her book *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, Carly Kocurek explores the roots of how and when video games became a gendered practice.[5] To this point, the industry really began to specifically market games to men and boys by the mid-1980s, and became a mainstay of boy culture by the mid-1990s. Around this time, an increasing number of feminist practitioners and researchers demonstrated that playing video games might decrease a barrier of entry for girls interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers, and started to make concerted efforts to figure out what might get girls to play more.[6] This is often

e. The idea that specific games serve only masculine or feminine audiences is deeply flawed. I will cover that notion in more detail in the subsequent section.

referred to as the "pink games movement" of the 1990s. To be blunt, early interest in getting girls (not women) into gaming was sometimes less playful and more utilitarian in intent. Games like *Barbie Fashion Designer* are frequently cited as early attempts to entice more girl players.[7] Others, such as Brenda Laurel, created the Purple Moon series as a less commercial way to think about feminized tastes in video games.[8f]

The video game industry and culture continued to be dominated by masculinity through the early 2000s, although—let me be clear—this does not mean that there were not plenty of woman and girl players. While masculinity might have been at the center of this culture, we could see the edges curling at the margins, where more diverse audiences played massively multiplayer online games (such as *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *City of Heroes*).[9] The history of game designers, while largely long lists of names of men, contains many stories that are discussed less, but are deeply influential to the medium.[10g] In competitive gaming, groups such as the Frag Dollz and PMS Clan demonstrated

f. *Barbie Fashion Designer* was less of a video game and more of a template for creating Barbie clothing. Purple Moon was a far better exemplar, with games aimed at adolescent and tween girls thematically focusing on social development.

g. Equally notable, Whitney Pow remarks that we can think of the queer, noncis figures in game history as a potentially "reparative" moment to think of a history that is active and full of possibility. In other words, there are moments in video game history that already exist for us to point towards. See Whitney Pow, "Outside the Folder, the Box, the Archive," *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories* 1, no. 1 (2019), http://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/76.

that there were indeed women and girls playing games.[h] It is worth noting that these audiences vary at the global level, and game play (online and eSports, in particular) varies by culture.[11] And yet in the United States, masculinity still dominated the market, both via gamer culture and industry norms. Because the market treated women players as anomalous, they continued to be largely overlooked. While I have discussed throughout this book that women are not automatically synonymous with the term "feminist," the interests of diversifying a presumptive masculine industry is a feminist concern, and therefore the lack of gender diversity (among other kinds of diversity) that overwhelmed the video game industry was and is a concern for some feminists.

Identity and representational politics are typically sticking points in how we talk about gender and video games. On the one hand, there is no shortage of examples demonstrating the sexist portrayals of female characters in games that are designed for a presumed masculine audience.[12] Yet Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm suggest treating representation in video games studies as "a formative, not merely expressive," system.[13] In other words, the complexity of video games necessitates a nuanced perspective on what representation looks like. Furthermore, in her book *Gaming at the Edge*, Shaw notes that "identification is not a necessary part of media enjoyment," and the "process of identification is diverse and multifaceted."[14] Representation and identification may be one puzzle piece, but

h. These are historical examples from the late 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s. More recently, the work of anykey.org has highlighted inclusivity in competitive gaming.

they are not in a cultural vacuum; realities are nuanced and complicated.

Not all video games continued to court masculine audiences, however. The video game market began to shift in earnest by the mid-2000s. An increasing number of "casual" computer games (games that were cheap or free, could be played for varying amounts of time, and were easy to learn) became the entry point for a deluge of new players—many of them women—playing hidden object and time management games.[15] "Casual games" largely sat as a point of opposition to what were often referred to as "hardcore games": games that were played on consoles or higher-powered computers for longer periods of time, and required both higher gaming skill sets and more money.[16] While the terms and labels can easily be critiqued, they do create a baseline for the transition that occurred during that time period.[17] As video game technologies continued to advance with the release of Nintendo's DS Lite and Wii (as well as the popularity of smartphones), video games became a more robust medium meant to appeal to broader audiences. Thus recent surveys show that about half of all players are women, although to that point, while 49 percent of adults play video games, only 10 percent consider themselves "gamers."[18]

The industrial structures of video game companies, too, are part of the problem. Both scholars and pundits have remarked on the reality that the video game industry has difficult work conditions, intense crunch times, and a generally poor quality of life.[19] These things create a fast turnover and burnout rate, and the majority of those in the industry grew up consuming games (and are engaging in passion careers). The video game industry has created a "cycle" wherein those already playing games are more likely to enter the workforce that creates games,

thereby making more games that they themselves might enjoy.[20] There has been a gradual yet meaningful shift in these numbers, though; in 2007, only 11 percent of the video game industry was comprised of women, but this statistic went up to 22 percent in 2014.[21i]

Cumulatively, these things have certainly marked an improvement in the previous state of the video game industry. The slow yet steady influx of diverse audiences coupled with a more varied set of video games have somewhat improved how our culture talks about the medium. Yet two things have kept the video game industry from truly expanding toward diverse, mass audiences. The first is a reputation for "toxic" gamer culture, and the second has been a lack of understanding of what kinds of games exist on the market.

The first concern—that of toxic gamer culture—has only gotten worse as the medium has expanded.[22] As video games have become more diverse, those who felt an ownership of hard-core games have made great sport out of harassing, deriding, and threatening women who are invested in video games in a variety of capacities. The least aggressive of these bullying tactics are deployed online in memes such as "filthy casuals" meant to mock casual game players.[j] At its most aggressive, the result

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i. This number is still complicated, however, because it includes women who work in nonproduction aspects of the industry. It does not, however, include those that work in factories (in China and elsewhere) to produce the material objects of gaming.

j. The "filthy casuals" meme began around 2009 as a derogatory descriptor for non-hard-core gamers. It is usually complemented with some statement of revulsion such as "Don't touch me, you filthy casual" or "Get out of here, you filthy casual."

has been GamerGate: the aforementioned hashtag movement that has engaged in the harassment, doxing, and threatening of women and minority video game players. [23k] GamerGate has been an antagonistic force that was meant to keep newcomers out of gamer culture—or at the very least, in their own corner—and has been relatively successful in doing so. Emma Vossen describes this space as one of "cultural inaccessibility" that permeates more broadly through the medium.[24]

The second concern is how the larger media industries represent video games as a product. News stories typically focus on the negative aspects of video games: toxic culture, violence, or addiction.[l] Sometimes, still, media stories discuss the unrealistic body types of game characters like Lara Croft or Bayonetta. Of course, occasionally there are positive stories about game play in retirement communities, "games for health," or "games for education," but there is almost a surplus of news stories that frame video games in a kind of moral panic. The prevailing narrative is always that video games are mostly bad for us, and absolutely bad for women and girls. Yet the negative focus on how games are represented means that newcomers are less likely to pick up games as a form of leisure. In other words, the coverage highlighting negative aspects of the industry often reifies itself by not encouraging new people to play, get into the industry, and change the content and style of games.

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k. Doxxing is internet speak for finding and publicly revealing personal information about an individual.

l. Even beyond the news, this has been a recurrent theme in popular culture. One episode of *Law & Order: SVU* even featured a fictional crime based on GamerGate.

In turn, while feminists who are on the outside of this circle might play at the edges, pick up a video game here or there, or be intrigued by the idea of playing more games, others also stay away in part due to the "onslaught" that Kishonna described earlier in this chapter. We need to not only form better pathways and rationales for feminists to become part of the larger gaming community but also construct new ones that supplant and dominate the existing infrastructure, thereby creating new opportunities for play.

In other words, we need to destroy the video game industry.

At the core of this book, I am making the argument that feminists need to think about video games differently: not in terms of their current cultural status, but as a playground for future feminist leisure. To once again answer Kishonna's question (Why invite more women into the onslaught?), my response is simple: because we belong here. Because feminism needs to engage more with play and better play, and the best possible way to do this is through video games. If we are able to disrupt the toxic, frequently antifeminist forces that dominate the video game industry, we will have moved further toward human equality. In order to work better, think better, and *be* better, we need to play more games.

But the question is where to start. Often I meet women who are intrigued by video games but assume that they are gun-filled, violent, on-screen explosions. Games do not need to be that, however, and more important, they are not all that. There are already feminist video games out there, and we don't need to dig too deep to find them. Furthermore, as a medium that engages with audiences more actively than many, video games allow players to experience narratives in distinct ways. In the

following two sections, I explore the feminist potential of game narratives and mechanics.

Telling Feminist Stories in Games

The history of video games is overwhelmed with stories that reinforce patriarchal culture and at the same time create opportunities to push back against that very culture. It is impossible to look at the cultural history of gaming and not assume that gaming narratives wouldn't be overwhelmed with the same masculinity that has guided the industrial economy of the medium for decades. Yet in the introduction to their volume *Feminism in Play*, Kishonna Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen write that "games provide both training grounds for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes and opportunities to become instruments of hegemony."[25] In other words, video games have a history that might tend toward misogyny, but have the overwhelming potential in their format to revise, rethink, and reprogram what it means to be a game.

Just as with any medium, a good feminist game needs to tell a good feminist story. This, of course, does not mean that a story needs to be overtly feminist (although it can be), but that the narrative content and structure need to align with feminist ideals. While I have no strict definition of what a feminist game text might look like, I hope that this section will provide a starting outline for how we can incorporate feminist ideals better into game narratives. In doing so, we can continue to diversify video game audiences.

To begin with, a game is a kind of text, and like any text, it has the narrative possibilities to affect, alienate, or subsume

its audience into a story. This itself should seem immediately obvious, yet the emotional potential of video games can provide a resonating kind of depth that is capable of enrapturing audiences, just as (or even more powerfully than) any other medium.[26] Aubrey Anable refers to video games as "affective systems" and writes that a game is an "interface for grasping a contemporary structure of feeling." The screens we interlock with make us feel things, and those things can bring us a new node for understanding identity and increasing empathy. Anable notes that "video games—as media objects, as cultural practices, and as structures of feeling—can tell us quite a bit about the collective desires, fears, and rhythms of everyday life in our precarious, networked, and procedurally generated world."[27] As we play things, we feel things, become things, and rethink things. There is nothing more feminist than this.

The emotional affect achieved by a game, however, is not the only thing that helps to make it a feminist narrative. A good feminist story—in any medium—is one that is conversational, personal, and relays narratives that surpass the expectations we tend to have of those ushered in to and for patriarchal audiences. To put it another way, we need to tell stories not just about women but also about characters who face the adversities set forth within our mainstream cultures. A feminist story doesn't need to be based in reality or truth, yet it should speak a kind of truth that resonates with diverse and underrepresented audiences.[28m]

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m. For example, fans of feminist science fiction know that a feminist story does not need to be based on the material boundaries of our world, and can be alien or nonhuman.

There are video games that have already begun to tell feminist stories in a variety of capacities. A feminist video game story has particular potential for empathy building, allowing the player to think within different perspectives and experiences. Video games as a medium represent a space where feminist stories not only *can* be told but also can be told *effectively* as a way to push the boundaries of other forms of storytelling, such as in the following examples:

- *Gone Home* is a game where the player wanders through an abandoned house, trying to uncover the clues of what happened to their family and—within the process—hearing the personal stories of the family's heterosexism. While the story is fiction, it has resonated with the coming out stories of many queer feminist gamers.
- *Ritual of the Moon*, designed by artist Kara Stone, is a twenty-eight-daylong narrative of a witch abandoned on the moon working through her feelings and choices as a meteor rapidly plummets toward the earth.
- *Broken Age* is a game divided in half: the player vacillates between a male and female protagonist within an absurdist science-fictional comedy. The story that emerges deftly critiques structural belief systems, forcing the player to constantly rethink the ridiculousness of their own world.
- In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the player explores an abandoned family home, uncovering clues about the family's curse through personal histories played out within vignettes.
- More overtly political, Ruiz's game *Darfur Is Dying* puts the player in the position of a member of a Darfuri family trying to leave their home to procure water in order to help keep their family alive and free from capture.

- *Never Alone* is a side-scrolling game where a young member of the Alaskan Inuit tribe uses traditional native storytelling to help guide the player through the story.

Each of these games uniquely positions the player to tell robust stories that have feminist appeal in a variety of ways. They show the importance and personal nature of storytelling. The result is that we can begin to see what feminist storytelling can look like in games.[29n]

Additionally, many of the games that I have listed above are already slightly dated. A few video game companies have increasingly used unique, artful styles and clever narratives that are heartfelt and feminist, even if unintentionally so. Game producer Anapurna Interactive, in particular, has changed the market by funding games almost as a form of curation, lifting up games that might have otherwise gone unmade. Many, such as its small narrative game about relationships, *Florence*, lie outside our cultural expectations for what a game could look like.

Yet it is also worth noting that *structurally*, video games already have narrative potential. Our cultural sense of narrative often hinges on the impression that stories need to be told linearly, reaching toward a singular climax. Traditional narrative theorists such as Robert Scholes have remarked on the cultural desire for narrative to emulate an orgasmic structure—a singular path leading toward a singular climax that completes the story.[30] Per Scholes's assessment, not following this structure creates a

n. That said, as Cody Mejeur warns, we must take care to make sure that these narratives do not so overtly reify tragedy that they cast these stories only in terms of victimization. Mejeur, specifically discussing queer narratives in games, theorizes that queer indie games need to also emphasize the beauty and power of queerness.

nonproductive (read: bad) narrative. Feminist narrative researchers such as Teresa de Lauretis and Susan Winnett have deftly observed that this structural assumption sheds light on the masculine perspective that has long dominated the academy and literature, with de Lauretis explaining that it reveals the "inherent maleness of all narrative movement."[31] Queer narrative theorist Judith Roof pushes these theories even further, suggesting that these conceits are not only masculine but heterosexist too.[32] She argues that queer and feminist narratives exist in a never-ending narrative middle, in the space that might be otherwise considered narrative "perversions"—not necessarily escalating toward a climactic conclusion, but existing within the pleasure of delay.

To this end, I have maintained elsewhere that video games suggest a space where, structurally, they have queer and feminist potential.[33] By not being climax-centric, the video game narrative is free from the heterosexual masculine perspectives that have guided our storytelling expectations for centuries. One good example of how story and structure can be narratively significant is in the game *Stardew Valley*.[o] In this game, the structure denies the player any specific climaxes, existing in the never-ending narrative middle. Yet at the same time, the stories within *Stardew* force the player to think about difficult issues from relationships, to abuse, to mental illness, to environmentalism, to commercialization. The game combines structure with themes

o. *Stardew Valley* is best described as being either "if *FarmVille* had depth" or "if *World of Warcraft* was a farming game." The game, while not nearly as robust as *World of Warcraft* (or as vacuous as *FarmVille*), tasks the player with farming, but also contains a great deal of melodramatic, semi-involved interpersonal relationships that can sometimes turn abusive and an ongoing debate about ethics in consumerism.

in a way that allows a space for deeply feminist narratives. The art is also pixelated and simple, giving the game an unassuming appearance.[34p]

Another good example of this is in the episodic game story *Life Is Strange*. In *Life Is Strange*, the player controls the life of Max Caulfield, a young woman in high school dealing with a series of both personal and supernatural crises. Toward the latter, the player is given the power to "replay" moments in Max's life. At points when choices are given to the player, the player may choose to revisit a moment and replay making new (and presumably better) life choices.[q] This replay creates an infinite number of narrative possibilities that downplay the importance of climax; it is the narrative middle that functions in the action. At the same time, Max's personal as well as intimate narrative and coming-of-age story help to create a game that feels deeply feminist, if not necessarily overtly so. Games such as *Life Is Strange* and *Stardew Valley* demonstrate how video game narratives can both be textually and structurally feminist in ways that push the medium yet also invite in more diverse players.[r]

The Mechanics of Feminism

The reason why *Life Is Strange* is successful at its coming-of-age story, though, is not because it is a flatly told narrative; rather, it

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p. This appearance is deceptive. Even if it were not, however, there is good precedence for why we might like "bad" aesthetics in video games.
q. The side-scrolling game *Braid* similarly allows players to hit the "reset" button on time to slightly fewer narrative ends.
r. However, it is also worth noting that in terms of content and representation, these gaming narratives are both fairly white.

is a game. It provides a space where the audience is not passive but instead playing an active part in the retelling of the story. The rewind button forces the player to think about reflection, yet it also gives the player an active opportunity to *reflect*. I am, of course, talking about not only the game as a kind of storytelling but the *game mechanics* too.

Game mechanics are often cited by those in game design, although the definitions vary slightly.[35] In short, typically a game mechanic refers to a thing you do in a game in order to move that game forward. So, for instance, in the game *Super Mario Bros*., the primary mechanics are "run" and "jump." This, of course, gets increasingly complex in larger game worlds, where mechanics vary in size and scope, with some dependent on other mechanics and others dependent on game processes. A game mechanic is distinct from a rule in that it is more than a guideline for game play; it functions like parts of an engine pushing the game play forward. Sicart weaves the multitude of definitions of game mechanics, revising them into a singular neat definition: they are "methods invoked by agents for interacting in a game world."[36] In short, game mechanics are entirely dependent on player agency.

Agency is a tricky word, used in different contexts for different purposes. In a game world, "agency" refers to the will to act—that is, the choices made that make the game unique and distinct to each player. A game mechanic, then, is the space where that action is defined and realized within the game world. Yet agency is also a concept quite familiar to feminist theory; typically, feminists refer to "agency" as the will to act and gain voice in a system of power. Rather than considering them discursively, interlocking these definitions helps to demonstrate why games (and perhaps video games in particular) can be so vital as an agentic-training tools.

Agency is a necessary part of a feminist definition of equality as well. It is a term used by feminists to articulate the need for active voices speaking up against systems of power. After all, having a will to act and speak back to systems of power is the essence of how we can redefine the status quo of hegemonic power structures. Certainly, things are not always quite so simple. The nature of oppression is that it is overwhelmed with the shadows of the voiceless. Agency is usually only available to those with some voice and the will to speak truth to power.[s] Agency is a tool; it is a concept that reminds those who are marginalized how to act. To this end, I argue that video games can become agentic-training tools.

By appreciating the agency embedded in video game mechanics and "decoupling" them from narratives, we can think about other lessons that they teach and the ideas that they promote. Ruberg, for instance, has written about the queerness inherent in the mechanics for games from *Pong* to *Octodad*, illustrating the importance of the agentic action within video games. In other words, mechanics have power, and that power can exceed the boundaries of the narrative they are representing.[37] As Ruberg demonstrates, even seemingly simple games can have mechanics that can be seen through a queer lens.

Alternatively, this sense of agency might all be an illusion in a game world. Sarah Stang writes that agency in video games is largely illusory; while it guides players and designers through ethical systems, interactivity itself is a meaningless construct

s. Those with no voice at all, those who are marginalized to the point of invisibility, have exponentially less agentic power to transform the world.

in a game space. Instead, she contends that true agency comes on the back end of the process: interpretations and fandoms embody the real kinds of agency that a player can have in a game.[38] Using the game *The Walking Dead* as an example, Stang asserts elsewhere that what is often perceived as agency are "false choices" allowed to the player.[39] Yet I would argue that this false agency, too, is a training mechanism for a world where we often feel like we have more will, agency, and voice than we might really have. Stephanie Jennings notes the beginnings of a "feminine gaze" in video games that marks the potential for increased agency for feminist gamers.[40] The agentic-training tools, in this way, offer a kind of realism for rethinking the role and weight of choices as well as power in our lives. Agency might be an illusion, but it can (as suggested by Stang) exceed the boundaries of the game itself. For example, Sarah Christina Ganzon's research on the mobile Japanese dating game *Mystic Messenger* (known as an otome game) shows how players can push back against the game's policing of feminine bodies.[41]

An example of how the agency within mechanics can change the meaning of a game's story is a constant in *Diner Dash*, a game that I have written about extensively.[t] I spent a good portion of the time I was writing my doctoral dissertation playing *Diner Dash*. Initially I was vexed by the game, dismissive of the domestic-themed mechanics that were so clearly aimed at women audiences, such as serving people, cleaning up after people, and keeping people entertained. The system of *Diner Dash* is

t. *Diner Dash*—and the subsequent series—is best described as a "time management game." It is a fast-paced game in which the player strategizes the struggle of quick-paced waitressing.

set up so that rather than these tasks making the player's avatar (Flo) satisfied, the goal is to keep customers always happy, signified by a series of lit-up hearts. Yet the more I engaged with these mechanics, the more I questioned my own initial read; while these activities were indeed domestic, the agency that the player has over the mechanics coupled with the ability to overcome the structures built into the game means that they are activities a player could succeed in. Whereas in the real world, cleaning, serving, and hosting might never garner satisfaction, in the game world the mechanics allow players to create order out of chaos. This is even more the case with the most recent version of the game *Dash Adventures*, as the player beautifies Dashtown. The agentic choices are limited here, with each point of beautification offering a finite number of player choices. Still, even finite choices give the player potential to put order into a chaotic system. *Diner Dash* demonstrates that mechanics are not narratives, and the satisfaction one derives from mechanics can help a player rethink opportunity of control within a power dynamic.

Often women game players have confided in me that a desire for "control" is a primary drive for certain games. Similar to the ordered chaos in *Dash Adventures*, many have confessed that this is why they play games such as Match 3s (*Candy Crush Saga* or *Bejeweled*, for instance). One reason why Match 3 games are so satisfying is that the rules and mechanics are simple, and help to create order in a disordered system. They show us how to exert our agency within a system weighted against us. In short, these games can help train us to be better feminists. Yet taking this a step further, there are puzzle games that beautifully couple the sense-making mechanics with the artistry of indie games. For example, *Monument Valley 2*'s sense-making puzzles force the

player see the world differently through Escher-esque mazes, yet follows a mother and daughter through imitations, separations, and unifications. A puzzle game like *Gorogoa* is similarly about rethinking the dynamics of a world in a way that moves pieces around to make it recognizable. In the process, the narrative forces us to think about the life cycle as well as the movement of time in intimate and magical ways.

The agency inherent in game mechanics is a tool to think about protest and power dynamics differently. In playing video games, feminists are training themselves to reconsider their own agency against systemically oppressive structures, and create action, meaning, and motion out of them. There is no question: feminist empowerment means playing more video games.

How to Play a Feminist

To reiterate: I want to destroy the video game industry. Not to see it gone forever, and not to end the medium, but rather to see it rise like a phoenix into a new form that lights up the world with its fury. We have not yet fully realized the potential of video games as a mass medium, and its masculine ownership has only held it back and kept it stagnant. The feminist potential of video games, as outlined in this chapter, only reveals a hint of what video games can do and be. Yet there are still too few of these games, and the ones that are available are not always accessible or properly distributed in a way that they can be played widely. Video games and their image in mass culture need a reboot.

Why invite more women and feminists into the onslaught? Again, to return to Kishonna's question posed at the beginning of this chapter, we do it because it is the only way to make that reboot happen on a larger cultural scale. An onslaught only

occurs if a few stragglers enter a battle hapless and ill equipped. Instead, we need an army of players there to change the systems, construct new products, and reclaim the joy of play. If feminist gaming audiences emerge and demand more games, and demand better games, the market will create itself around us.

But how do we play feminists? How do we construct accessible places for emerging audiences to learn, discuss, and reconsider the products of digital games?

What we need is a new set of entry points—rabbit holes—to pull in feminist players, using video games as a springboard and impetus to build an equality of leisure and play. This, of course, is not an easy feat. Yet by retracing paths that are already well established by audiences of feminists, we can encourage emerging players to create new communities of play where they had not previously existed.

5 Gaming in Circles

Finding the "Game Curious"

I like to think that there are two different kinds of people in the world: the people who love video games, and the people who don't know *which* video games they love yet. Perhaps this is overly simplistic; I am aware that there are people in the world who don't like any iteration (digital or analog) of a "game." In my experience, however, people can find a kind of video game that is satisfying in a way that fills some intense desire for leisure in their lives.

I get approached by a lot of people who are decidedly not gamers; these people might be relatives, friends, students, or colleagues who think they might like games, but don't know where to start. The folks who approach me are people who maybe have dabbled in *Candy Crush* on their phones, sometimes play *Words with Friends*, and assume that they are never going to be interested in owning a console system. They think video games are, by and large, not made for them. They might like jigsaw puzzles or board games. They might like being social on their phones, but don't know what is worth their time. They are people who have accepted the reality that video games are

not all violent dystopias. But they also have no idea where to start finding alternatives. To this end, Kelly Bergstrom has aptly noted that nonparticipants—those who often opt out for a variety of reasons—are a missing component in much of video game research.[1] We need to pay attention to who is not playing, and why they don't play.

Sagan Yee, a game artist activist from Toronto, labeled this kind of person "game curious."[2] Yee deploys the term to galvanize nongamers, turning them into game players through meetups. Later in the chapter, I'll discuss Yee's work in more detail, but for now I adopt the label "game curious" because it suits the kind of audience I'm seeking. Subsequently, then, the big question is this: How do we find the game curious? Furthermore, how do we tell them about the opportunities afforded by digital play? How do we curate game lists for them and give them a safe space for ludic experimentation?

Here's the thing: because of the past reputations of video games (that they are violent, addictive, and predictors of toxic masculinity), the idea of entering into gaming might seem daunting to a newcomer. There are not many obvious vectors with which to know where to start, what to play, what terminology is meaningful, and how personal "taste" plays into it. If you tell someone who has experience in a lot of digital play that a game is a "platformer" or "real-time strategy," this probably means distinct things that will tell them whether or not they will like that game. But to the game curious, these sound like random descriptors that do not necessarily map to a myriad of experiences. The game curious are not always able to articulate what they like. Sure, the iOS app store has short vignettes titled things like "Games for Nongamers," but that is only going to hit limited audiences, and still might come up short in evangelizing

new gamers.[a] The game curious are out there, seeking experiences yet unable to turn down the din from the volumes of games that appear in the wild.

As I was approached, increasingly, by friends, family, students, and colleagues who were game curious, I came up with an idea. I contacted several women I knew locally and created a Facebook group, posting the following message:

> This group is an experiment. A kind of feminist gaming intervention.
>
> There are a lot of amazing video games out there—games that will make you laugh and cry. Games that tell stories. Games that give experiences. Games that you (maybe?) have never heard of. I am tired of people talking about video games and violence and video games and sexism. As a feminist video game scholar, I want to change the conversation.
>
> This group is an experiment. I am going to treat it like a book club. We will agree on a game (perhaps I will choose the first few). The games we choose will be literary, compelling, thought-provoking games. They will be easily accessible and worth discussing. I will post the game, and (if you choose to) we can meet up and discuss the game in real life, like a book club. There can absolutely be wine.
>
> It's OK if you aren't a gamer. It's OK if you don't know anything about video games. This group is meant to be a safe space for learning about new things, zero pressure.
>
> This group is an experiment. It might fail. I'm starting local to see what happens. If you have friends that you think might be into this, invite them! Let's see if we can change the conversation about video games.

Because we all live in Athens, Georgia, I called the group "Athena's Gaming Circle," both in deference to the town we live and

a. The recently released Apple Arcade system is yet another step forward toward indoctrinating the game curious.

recognition of the goddess Athena's feminist implications. The collective was and is imperfect. It is by no means diverse. It is a sort of flotsam and jetsam of random people I know from around town. Some of them agreed to join under the duress of my pleading gaze. Others messaged me privately after the invitation—a bit put off by the request at first because they don't have time for games. Some invited other friends. Some continue to lurk in the group and play the games on their own. Others quietly bowed out when enough time had passed that they figured it probably wouldn't offend me.

Mine is not the first attempt to galvanize folks who are not necessarily central to the video game industry. Notably, Gray's work features black women Xbox players, studying how they collectivize as a form of empowerment.[3] Yet the game curious are not necessarily conversant in the specifics of taste nor how to self-organize around the theme of games. Sarah Schumann's Dear Games project in Atlanta is a collaboration between Charis Books (a feminist bookstore) and Georgia Tech that provides a variety of interventions, pushing at boundaries and visibility toward video game diversity.[4] And the aforementioned game curious movement has steadily gained steam in both Toronto and Montreal.

Yee, one of the cocreators and organizers of Game Curious Toronto, explains that the mandate of this group was to seek out people who don't self-identify as gamers. While the project is not necessarily to evangelize, it does use a rather ambitious schedule. Meeting in libraries, Game Curious Toronto focuses on computer games and has participants meet for six weeks, three hours per week; participants spend the first half of their time playing the game and then discuss it as a group. Yee's target

Figure 5.1
Sagan Yee's bingo card for why people don't play video games. Reprinted with permission of Sagan Yee.

audience is the nongamer or those who do not self-identify as a gamer. To this point, in her promotional materials, she created a bingo card of reasons why people don't game (see figure 5.1). For each of the squares of the bingo card, Yee had clear responses that push back against stereotypes and misconceptions of what video games are as well as what they could be in the everyday lives of players (or nonplayers). In the center free space, she places the rejoinder, "Yet I want to know more!"

I structured my gaming circle in the spirit of the game curious movement. In the intervening months, a total of about a dozen of us showed up to various gatherings.[b] The first few were at my home, and we later moved to the Rook and Pawn, our local board game café. At the time of this writing, we have played about a half-dozen games: *Florence*, *Monument Valley*, *Reigns: Her Majesty*, *Donut County*, *Gorogoa*, and *Stardew Valley*. In what follows, I break down the specifics of what, in my opinion, works and does not work, and why gaming circles could be an important way to move the industry forward. Additionally, in the appendix to this book, I offer a blueprint for how to start your own gaming circle. If we are going to disrupt an industry, we need some concrete practices that will get us there. Gaming circles are one possible method toward achieving this end.

b. The larger group consisted of twenty-two to twenty-five people, with a rotation of about twelve regulars and several stragglers. Some group members lurked but rarely attended the meet-ups.

Feminist Methodologies

Gaming circles were not entirely a new idea for me. A previous iteration had percolated while I was working on my dissertation, although the technology and zeitgeist were not yet ripe for its implementation. But with the emergence of smartphones, an increasing number of artfully conceived mobile games, and a growing audience of game curious individuals, the timing was right for an intervention.

At first blush, I conceived of this as a kind of participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a methodology that seeks to not only bear witness to systems of injustice but also change them. Robin McTaggert explains, "Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership—responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice." PAR is a methodological approach that stands between traditional research methods (implying an impartial researcher) and activism. When done properly, it creates a space where participants and researchers can equally share knowledge to reconsider power structures in systems of injustice. Per McTaggert, "Participatory action research starts small and develops through the self-reflective spiral: a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, (implementing plans), observing (systematically), reflecting and then replanning, further implementation, observing, and reflecting."[5] In other words, PAR is not about a single iteration of research but rather is conversational; it reflects the needs, desires, and actions of those it is studying. The goal is a kind of reflexive, living research that envisions participants as coauthors toward a greater end or activist goal.

In a platonic sense, my early vision of gaming circles was as a space where women could gather regularly. As with book clubs, there would be monthly game assignments meant to have participants think about games in literary and aesthetic ways. The goal of this action was (and continues to be) to help more players become articulate about games, hopefully simultaneously enhancing their existing leisure practices. I see gaming circles as a means of accumulating the voices of people who might not typically see themselves as gamers. These people, I argue, might ultimately have more stake in the video game industry than they realize.

Yet I also know that I continue to play an active role in guiding my specific group with suggestions and help. Given this, PAR is not necessarily the ideal articulation of my activist research method. PAR implies that I am watching a preexisting system with low levels of intervention. In other words, in a truly PAR project I would be allowing the participants to lead the activities of the circle. This, while ideal, is not practical. Over months of managing the circle, I realized that many of the members did not want to take this entirely on themselves; they wanted feedback, help, and advice. They wanted a certain degree of expertise to help curate an overwhelming market of video games.

A better vantage point toward the goal is the larger scope of feminist intervention methods, a kind of knowledge coconstruction that sidesteps PAR's need for discrete, preconstructed communities and allows for the creation of new ones.[6] In her research, Sarah Evans explains that "feminist interventionist work builds upon PAR's principles for researchers to work on behalf of communities, but where PAR often works with pre-existing communities, feminist interventionist studies aim to transform conditions by creating, and documenting, novel structures that advance the

interests of women and other underrepresented groups."[7c] The idea of feminist interventions is not only taking note of preexisting behaviors but also helping to create, transform, and rearticulate new practices toward feminist ends.

Athena's Gaming Circle was my first step in a feminist intervention, but it is no means my last. My circle was local, a group of people who mostly knew one another (or who were friends of friends), and who fell into a comfort zone for me to tease out the idea. From this smaller group of women, I learned quite a bit about how the industry can approach the game curious differently, and how we can talk about games to this nascent audience. Of course, the homogeneity of group members does not make their experiences universal. Yet I see my participant activists as a starting point to push this conversation forward through the articulation of their experiences.

Introducing the Novice Gamer to Video Games

The women in Athena's Gaming Circle came to me with a discursive set of experiences with and impressions of digital games. Some had been gaming since childhood, while others had barely ever picked up a video game before. Most of the participants are either millennial or Gen X, and many got their previous experience by playing with siblings in arcades, or on systems like the Apple 2, ColecoVision, Atari 2600, or the Nintendo Entertainment System. In one case, a participant came from a household

c. Sarah Evans's larger project is about deploying feminist interventions to provide opportunities for nongaming women to cocreate games through informal learning spaces.

that specifically chose games (over television) as a primary form of entertainment. She originally learned to play games from her grandmother, explaining:

> I started playing video games probably when I was in preschool. And I started because my grandmother had a computer, and she had all these cool games. She was the first person I knew who had a computer in her house and was really interested in games. She was always doing crossword puzzles, and for her, I think video games were an extension of that. She loved technology so the idea that you could play these games on the computer really appealed to her. So I would go over to her house and she would have tons of games that I could play, and she would set me up with a game and come back an hour later.

This, for sure, is a fairly unique experience of multigenerational influence, causing a woman (then girl) to become interested in video games. Others' experiences varied, with some having little-to-no experience with digital game play, and others having moderate amounts of knowledge about video games.

Some participants had previously done more game watching than actual playing. One member, who enjoys solo play but also spends a good amount of time watching her husband and elementary school–age son play games, remarked that often she prefers to watch play over engaging because she finds games "visually interesting." She told me, "I don't like to wander around and find stuff, but I like watching when other people do. I think part of it is because I'm not very good at the controls that are associated with those kinds of games. I prefer puzzle games, which he [her spouse] does not love."

This complaint over a lack of precision and expertise creating a reticence toward gaming, or a desire to just watch (as opposed to actively play), was one that arose again and again, both at our meet-ups and in one-on-one interviews. One participant explained that when she first began to play some games with

her son, "it was more labor because I was really bad at it and I hate being bad at things. And as an adult, I felt dumb, and that's not a good way to feel, and then I was like, I'm going to step up and model resiliency, and model failing upward. Once I said, 'I'm really bad at this,' and just accepted that, I let him help me. Then it just became fun and is leisure time. So it's time we can spend together." In turn, one of the rules of the gaming circle is that getting help is not cheating.[d] For example, the final "boss level" of the game *Donut County* was particularly difficult for many members of the circle, requiring a new set of skills that the game had not previously trained the player on. Instead of dwelling in the frustration, several participants (myself included) handed the game off to a child or spouse, asking them to help finish the level in order to complete the game's narrative arc. This was something that I, as the facilitator, encouraged both on the Facebook group and in the meet-ups.

To some extent, this seemed to ease anxieties vis-à-vis the newness of interface and experimentation. Nonetheless, several participants expressed apprehension when confronted with a new game. One articulated this sentiment as it pertains to the game *Reigns: Her Majesty*: "I never figured out what that was about, and we got together and I never got it, and it was frustrating and not fun, and it was like I had to play so I didn't let people down and other people were playing it and having fun, and I was like, what am I missing?" Thus one ongoing challenge with the group is to not use social pressure to create a new set of anxieties for novice players.

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d. By "getting help," I am referring to walk-throughs and having others provide in-game assistance at varying levels.

In an ideal world, each game might involve two meet-ups: one to explain and practice the game, and a second one to discuss it. In our group, it was difficult to arrange time in such a way that this was feasible, although theoretically, others putting together gaming circles might want to consider combining meet-ups, with the first half of a meet-up meant to discuss the previous game, and the second half to set up everyone in the subsequent game.

The Whys and Whats of the Gaming Circle

The tastes of Athena's gamers are distinct, and the reasons they decided to participate are equally diverse. Some joined because I had recommended games to them previously and they wanted similar recommendations. One person specifically was not initially interested because she had previously thought that she did not like mobile games (and only liked console and computer ones), but decided to do it in order to meet new people—much like one would do in a book club. On joining, she learned that she did indeed like certain kinds of mobile games.

Given the broad base of why people joined, they also had different impressions of what they thought they might like versus what they actually liked. Within the group, some members found they had far more affinity for puzzles, and others had far more interest in story-based games. Hence games like *Florence* had a strong appeal with people who were story focused, and games like *Monument Valley* hit a note with puzzle-oriented gamers.[8e]

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e. *Florence* is a story game about relationships, and *Monument Valley* is a puzzle about navigating a princess through impossible terrains. That

Here is a perfect articulation of the implications of this problem; if women are treated as a genre, as opposed to a market, then the specificity of taste gets lost. With some games, it turned out that about half the participants paid attention to the story, while the other half focused on the puzzling aspects. In *Donut County*, for example, there is a surreal underlying story that was particularly entertaining to a set number of people in the group, while others were clear that they thought it was silly and so mostly clicked through the dialogue portions. Yet when asked if the group would be better served if we divided up into puzzle and narrative gamers, I was told "no." One member remarked that doing this would limit the number of games everyone would be introduced to. In short, there was a general understanding that it is acceptable if everyone doesn't like every game.

Rethinking Leisure and Time

One of the primary goals of Athena's Gaming Circle was getting participants more cognizant of and thoughtful about how they use their leisure time; even if that time wasn't spent playing video games, I hoped that it would create reflective activities in which they might notice leisure more. I hoped they would become thoughtful and conscientious about their own practices as well as the leisure behaviors of those around them. As I discussed in detail in chapter 2 of this book, leisure is a fraught activity for many women. For sure the women in this group had

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different gamers have different tastes in styles is, of course, unsurprising in a lot of ways. In my previous book, however, I quoted Sheri Graner Ray, who asserted that the video game industry treats women as a genre rather than a market.

the class privilege to make room for leisure time. I wanted to know how they made this room, and subsequently, their awareness of the role that games played within it.

Many of the participants of Athena's Gaming Circle had interests and practices that echoed older leisure studies, such as explored in chapter 2; several are crafters (interested in sewing, knitting, and so on) as well as readers and television viewers. Some had previously played games on mobile devices, and a few on consoles. Additionally, many of them described their leisure as typically being done interstitially, in snippets of time. As one participant explained,

> I find most of my stuff is usually connected to my phone, which I use more than my laptop, just for convenience. I'm a single mom, I have a teenager, so I do a lot of waiting in parking lots, school pickups, waiting in lines for different things, and those are times when I can do whatever I want, and I'll play the bubble shooters and Match 3 phone games because it helps me not focus on other things, because I have to be focused on the game, which is also relaxing.

The use of smartphones as a mode of curing boredom was referenced at several points in interviews, where participants often linguistically slipped between describing leisure and filling time during the doldrums of everyday life. In this way, games merged into many participants' lives seamlessly because of their similarity to other practices (social media and fiber arts, in particular), and the ability to pick up mobile games and put them down again.

Yet several participants maintained a reticence about games because they somehow didn't feel "productive" enough. So, for example, one observed, "I was going to say it feels the same as knitting where you just pick it up when you're on the couch, but it doesn't have the same feeling of knitting of 'I'm doing something, I'm producing something.'" Another remarked that the distinction to them between digital play and fiber arts is that

there is "no product at the end." In other words, while fiber arts *feel* practical and as though they are aiming toward a final artifact, digital game play for many of the participants felt more aimless and frivolous.

One participant, who had previously not played many games, specifically began the gaming circle at a time when she was breastfeeding and found that those moments of time created elastic spaces where gaming was a feasible, one-handed activity. At the same time, though, she still felt that leisure was hierarchical, commenting,

> In my judgeyness, I feel like there is a hierarchy of leisure activities, and some seem more worthwhile than others, and that probably has to do with whether or not they are productive in some way. I've always been anti–electronic games for most of my life because in a communal setting, people sit down and turn their brains off and play a racing game for six hours, and then they wake up and their day is gone. In my condescending world, that's not as beneficial to yourself or humanity and as highbrow as reading a book. So in my mind, you can read for six hours and not do anything productive and not accomplish anything, but your brain is engaged so that's better in my mind. That could be total bullshit, though!

This balance of trying to understand digital play as a "worthwhile" activity was a fairly prevalent theme in one-on-one conversations with participants. In these discussions, many implied that the "worthiness" of an activity was its relationship to having a sheen of "productivity" wherein they felt like an activity needed to involve some kind of engagement toward a practical end.[f] Yet the games I selected for the circle seemed to assuage

f. It is worth noting that some of the participants were jarred in this realization that their leisure should be worthwhile or productive, with one even laughing that this inclination seemed "contrary to her personality,"

many of these anxieties regarding productivity. One participant noted, "If I sit and play a bubble-popping game for an hour, there is a little guilt that I just blew an hour of my life playing that. But with *Florence* or *Monument Valley*, I don't feel that guilt. I don't know why."

Probably the most surprising realization for some of the participants involved how they think of their spouse's leisure time in distinctly different ways from their own. Several of the members of the gaming circle were startled by the disparities between their own and their spouse's leisure. One, for instance, said that she had been recently pressuring her husband to engage in more leisure, even going so far as to make him "relaxing to-do lists." Another said that because she does a lot of crafts, she really likes it when her husband sits down and plays a video game with their son, as opposed being "productive" in the household. Others suggested that when their partner is around, they are less likely to take personal leisure time, especially when it goes beyond "family" leisure time.

So members of the gaming circle ultimately saw our gatherings as a double win pertaining to leisure; they viewed it as a way to both partition and self-excuse time for a specific kind of leisure activity (both in terms of themselves and others), and also take time to meet up with like-minded women.[g] Video games (and the activities of the gaming circle, in particular) seemed to

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despite being true. Additionally, this aligns with what I discussed in the second chapter, wherein conversations about leisure activities often turn into ones about productivity.

g. In some ways, the group seemed to create a kind of "permission slip" for play.

be a kind of glue for enabling one another to improve the leisure in their lives.

Community Building through Play

The successes of the gaming circle are almost entirely due to its engagement with a sense of community. At the same time, it might force us to look differently at diversity in gaming. Gamers of the past galvanize and become a community because of an existing love of video games. With Athena's Gaming Circle, however, the desire for community superseded the actual games; members joined in order to foster community, not necessarily always for the actual games. This approach means that those defining video game culture must take a dramatically different approach when trying to diversify a player base. To this point, another participant said, "If you know other people are doing it, it makes you do it. So I like the social aspect of the circle, and maybe if I knew more women playing games, I'd play more."

In turn, while it is difficult to schedule everyone to come to the circle and discuss games, the group members feel that this is unquestionably the most important aspect. As one pointed out, "I think the hardest thing for me has been to make the time to come to the meet ups. But that's also a fun part—being able to see each other face-to-face." Community also forms a supportive space for troubleshooting games with a semifamiliar group, and a tacit understanding that members won't be trolled for "stupid questions" or getting stuck. Having a space where several friends were all trying to game for the first time together gave group members a feeling of camaraderie. Even when several people did not like the game, there was a sense that there was a space for ongoing conversation, help, and feedback.

One group member even asserted that while she liked the community aspects of the group, she had little desire to play games with others. Speaking of the larger sphere of gaming, she explained, "I have friends who are always, like, join my guild, and I'm like, no. I don't want to deal with people in my leisure time. So the only games I play with other people on my phone are *Words with Friends* and *Trivia Crack*. I don't play with strangers." Conversely, others expressed that given the option, they would love to play in a social gaming environment with other members of the gaming circle.[h] Yet the locality of the circle mattered. The game curious members in the circle seemed to have little desire to do this among absolute strangers. The physical meet-ups, as difficult as they have been to organize, were integral to the sense of community and desire to continue to play.

A Patchwork of Play

The phrase "gaming circle" is a light play on the idea of the sewing circles that many women engaged in during the first wave of feminism in the United States.[i] The Grimké sisters in particular were known for using sewing circles to gather groups of Christian white women to discuss the need to abolish slavery.[9] The circles engaged women in domestic spaces that challenged discourses related to the politics of the public sphere. Essentially these were allowable spaces meant for women to push back against traditionally masculine rhetorical opportunities; in a young United

h. Currently, I have an ongoing game of a digital version of the board game *Ticket to Ride* with two members of the group.

i. First-wave feminism typically refers to women in the United States fighting for the right to vote and end slavery.

States, it gave white women a chance to have voice before garnering the right to vote. At the same time, what was being done in a sewing circle hit a specific note of productivity under the guise of a community-based leisure activity. Whether sewing activities were projects for self, family, or charity, the products of a sewing circle created an excuse for women to gather and talk about topical issues.

This combination of crafting and gaming is not without precedence. Notably, creator scholars such as Anne Sullivan and Gillian Smith have worked with teams to create "craft games": games that use craft-based controllers, craft machines as interface, create craft patterns, or use crafting as a core mechanic.[10] Examples of the work that comes from these initiatives include *Loominary*, a game that uses a tabletop loom to navigate a twine game, and *eBee*, an electronic quilting game.[11] They explain that "integrating games and crafts . . . provides an opportunity for interrogating and disrupting gendered assumptions around craft and play."[12] Along with Anastasia Salter, Sullivan and Smith argue elsewhere that crafting, in itself, has gamelike qualities, offering examples such as bees, progressive crafts, and swaps, which challenge some of the preexisting expectations and paradigms of game design.[13] Kocurek created a scholarly, craft-themed ARG for the feminist journal *ada* that deftly hybridizes scholarship, feminism, crafting, and activism.[14] Just as with crafting games, gaming circles are meant to reconsider these themes that while on the surface might seem diametrically opposed, might foster an increasing amount of inclusivity and voice into a space where they had not been previously been designed.

In my most utopian vision of Athena's Gaming Circle, I'd like to think that this is what we are working toward. It is a space for women to engage with a problem existing in the public sphere,

but deployed via small acts of resistance. In our circle we play *our* games, discuss *our* leisure, and grapple (in small ways) with how we might push back against the larger video game industry. As one participant noted of her experiences, "I think it made me realize that there are a ton of games that I was not aware of, and going back to the fact that there are phone games that are beautiful games with unique stories and not just a time waster." I find that our meetings are a way to chat about issues in our lives, big and small, as they pertain to leisure, work, play, games, family, and spouses. In this way, the circle has provided both a springboard to allow members to find beautiful games to engage with, and a release valve to consider leisure and play more generally.

Yet we are one circle of a dozen or so regulars. We are few in number and homogeneous. Much like traditional sewing circles, we are essentially a group of white middle-class women with opinions. And that is OK, if imperfect. Leisure is not a zero-sum experience, however, and if we want to truly improve leisure at a global level, we need to branch out to find ways to engage with ethnicity, social class, and disability, and thus also remind us that play and leisure are necessary experiences for all. If we are going to truly transform the video game industry, we can't limit ourselves to our own narrow practices.

When I began, I used the metaphor of the gaming circle because I liked its proximity to a sewing circle. The further I get into the process, though, the more I like to think that it needs to be a patchwork quilt. To expand and engage with an industry that has remained stalwart and inflexible about diversity, we need to create a blueprint for a grassroots experience that can be defined by distinct communities nationally and internationally with unique ludic needs. As a feminist intervention, the goal is not to perfect my little circle but instead to push it outward, and

Figure 5.2
Members of the gaming circle playing *Stardew Valley*. Photo taken by the author.

allow each community that wants to engage with the idea to add a little of their own voice and style. This patchwork of play is the vision for future gaming circles, moving beyond the wise gaze of Athena.

The appendix to this book is my blueprint.[j] It provides structural elements, advice, game suggestions, and discussion questions. It is not meant to be followed precisely; it is meant for different folks in different communities to experiment with and find the play that they need. Video games are not the only path toward improving an equality of leisure, but they are one

j. See also http://www.playlikeafeminist.com.

possible starting point. Deploying communities of play in our lives gives us a vector for protest and means of pushing back against an industry that has previously lacked diversity, offering us an opportunity to talk to one another about how to improve our leisure on personal and societal levels. To stretch this point further, if you want to disrupt the video game industry, this is your chance to do so. The more people who play—and become vocal members of communities of play—the more our voices will influence the industry. This is your starting point for making a better world. Take it and go play like a feminist.

Conclusion: Play More

On New Year's Day of 2019, I explained the idea of "resolutions" to my seven-year-old son. While he stubbornly refused to write any resolutions about himself, he did offer to write some for members of the family.[a] For mine, he wrote two words: "play more" (see figure 6.1).

I was struck by the incisiveness of his resolution on my behalf. He has a vague sense of my research and area of study, but I couldn't tell if he understood the significance of his note. "Play more," he wrote, and I wondered whether he was telling me to play more with him or on my own, or if he wanted me to play outside, play video games, or play with his action figures and LEGOs. Perhaps he was referring to all these things. It was such a perfect, brilliant resolution, and it had not even occurred to me to make it for myself. As a scholar who studies women and play, why had I never resolved to play more?

It has been four months since my son wrote that resolution, and perhaps I have done a poor job of fulfilling its vision and intent. I still do not play enough. I am not alone in this; it seems

a. This is absolutely on brand for him.

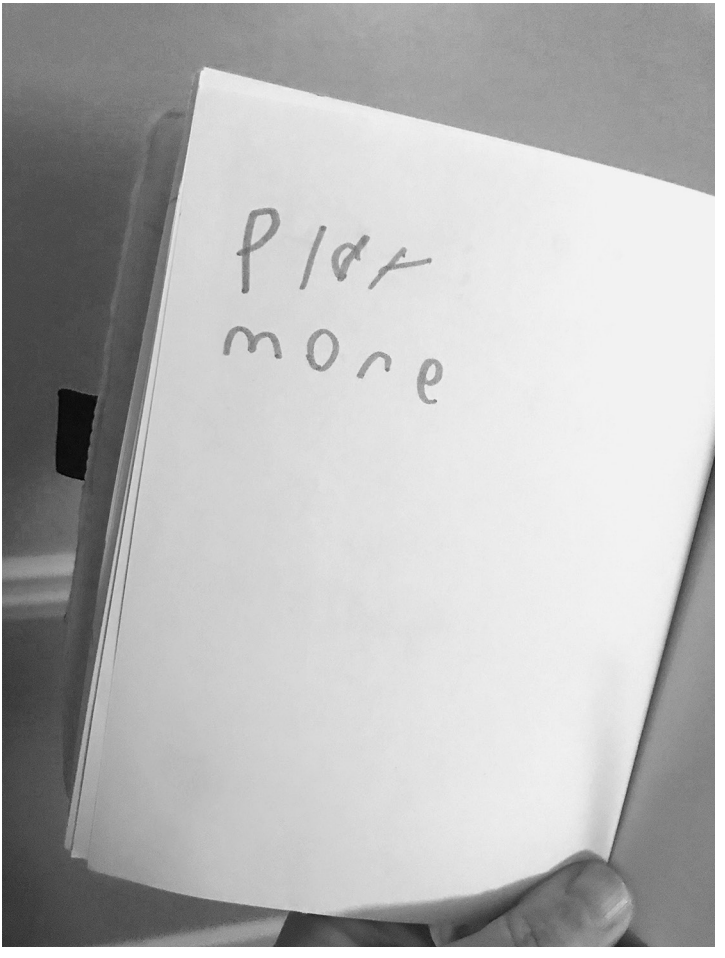

Figure 6.1
"Play more"—my son's New Year's resolution for me. Photo taken by the author.

that many of us have a difficult time unlocking, enjoying ourselves, and playing. As we age and the realities of time take hold, our lives get larger, and sometimes they devour us whole; the creep of responsibility makes us feel a need to justify our play to others. But my seven-year-old wrote me a suggestion to play more while I wrote a book about feminists not getting enough play, and this in itself seems significant.

My son wants me to play more presumably because play is a catalyzer; it is an element of change. I want us—feminists—to play more much for the same reason. It is a catalyzer; an element of change. If we want to change the world, we need to turn inward and change ourselves, finding ways to play more and advocate for that play in others. My son remarking that I should play more is the best evidence that I can find that I am raising a feminist.[b]

I wrote this book in part because the weight of the world can feel tremendous and unbearable. The surge of racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, white nationalist politics has become overwhelming to me at times. As a result, I find myself wanting to create solutions that downplay my anger and frustration, and focus more on redefining how I can make a difference both internally and externally through the pleasures of play. To this end, the work of this book has been about outlining and highlighting potential practices that I—that all of us—can engage in to be both better feminists and better humans. In many ways, the paths toward this are discursively constructed; I have advocated

b. Although it is not lost on me that he did not offer to take on more responsibilities in order to enable me to play more.

for rethinking leisure, protest, and video games to better situate them within the context of play. This, to me, is how we *play like feminists*.

As I finish this book, I keep thinking about the relationship between Athena, the unofficial mascot of my gaming circle, and Medusa, who I discussed as a feminist role model in chapter 3. In classical Greek myth, the two sit in contestation: it was the goddess who cursed Medusa after she was raped in Athena's temple. A popular Tumblr theory, however, is that Athena wasn't cursing Medusa but instead empowering her—by giving her the gift of turning mortals into stone.[c] My laughing Medusa, featured in chapter 3, does not negate Athena's power. The two are not in competition, they are in conversation. I would like to think that regardless of Athena's original motives, the pair might be giggling together while playing video games and laughing at incels. This is not classic Greek myth, but it is the myth that feminists must embrace as we leave the patriarchal system built by the gods.

The title of this book, and its primary thesis, is an argument toward playing like feminists. In chapter 1, I maintained that playing like a feminist should be a disruptive and inclusive practice. It should be these things for sure. But it should also be personal and prolific. Advocating for playing like a feminist means finding your inner joy in the form of play and leisure, regardless of its specifics, and sending it outward into the world. Feminist play is about both self-play and fighting for an equality of other people's play. Regardless of the specifics—if it is through games, technology, craftivism, reading, or sports—feminist play is about both self-advocacy and the advocacy of that play for others. As

c. Tumblr theories are the best theories.

we fight, we must not lose sight of the pleasures of play, or the importance of looking beyond our own lives and experiences.

The phrase "play like a feminist" is a call to arms. It is meant to advocate for more play, but to do so in empowering ways. Playing like a feminist is a deadly serious activity. To play like a feminist might mean to play with abandon, but also it can be used to assert our unmovable stances toward equality. It can be whimsical and also aggressive. Don't mess with me; I play like a feminist.

In her thoughtful piece on the intersections between feminism and digital play, Emma Westecott writes that we should focus on commonalities rather than fissures between feminisms: "It is the recognition of affinities, and the building of alliances, and coalitions that allow feminists to acknowledge the multitude of individual and collective identities held by women worldwide. Women do not have common experiences but can recognize and unite around shared interests and objectives."[1] Our technological changes, while creating some ruptures, foster opportunities for shared experiences as well. Play and games offer a chance to construct better feminist practices.

If you are someone reading this book who is lucky enough to have the experience and knowledge of video games or other forms of play, your job is an interventionist one: find others in your life and help advocate for play in their lives. This can come in smaller gestures (giving someone time off to do things) or grander ones (giving them a gift card to buy mobile games). It can also come from deep discussions, asking the loved ones in your life how they can do leisure better. Specifically when it comes to video games, the gaming circles are meant as a possible intervention for feminists to become more engaged in one particular facet of play in our modern era—one that I have

personally found particularly powerful and fruitful. If you are someone who does not play video games, I hope this book has encouraged you to try some new things. If you are someone who already plays, I hope this book has convinced you, too, to become a video game evangelist for nonplayers.

This book is an intervention, but it is also meant as a provocation. There is no right way to play like a feminist; our experiences of play should be diverse and complicated. In the end, though, it is my son who wrote the final argument to take with you; his resolution should serve us all better. Play more.

Appendix: Blueprint for Starting Your Own Gaming Circle

Gaming circles are a feminist practice; it is a form of deliberatively activist play that can disrupt the video game industry, and add different kinds of leisure and community into the lives of participants. Membership, game styles, meet-ups, and interactions need not be identical—just like book clubs are not identical. My gaming circle was limited to adult women who were local to where I lived, though that is not the only way to do things. In what follows, I offer suggestions for what has worked with my group. In a larger sense, gaming circles should become a kind of patchwork of games and practices, wherein each of you can add your own style and flavor to your group.

Putting Together Your Circle

Who do you want to play with? While my circle consists entirely of women, in reality the feminist practices predicated on the circle need not be determinative of cisbinaries in a "women's group." More important, the group should consist of game curious folks who share a like-mindedness in their desire to think differently about what games are out there and have a support network to experiment with. Start by reaching out to a few

people you think might be interested in the idea and ask them to branch outward, inviting friends or friends of friends. I have found that having a list of ten to twenty interested people garners about six to ten people per meet-up. But even starting with three interested friends is enough. Your group might be small at first; give it time to grow.

From the beginning, decide on a good method of communication for group members depending on what they regularly use. Facebook, although popular, is not without its problems. In my experience, a Facebook "secret group" or "private group" is an easy way to poll people about games and times/days as well as make sure that a large number of people get the message. As many people continue to migrate off this platform, however, it is necessary to be flexible. Others might want to consider using Slack, email, or group text. If you are already part of a book club, see if they are interested in transitioning to occasional games.

Several people might respond by telling you that they "don't play video games" and might not be interested. I find it is helpful to ask those who are resistant to the idea why they don't play games. Is it about time? Is it about their own perceptions of digital games? Sagan Yee's bingo card in chapter 5 embodies a nice rhetorical visual to assuage these anxieties. Take this opportunity to have a conversation with your friends about how they think about leisure and what they would like to see improve. Even if they don't join, these are conversations we should be having.

Selecting Games

There are many different ways to select games for the circle. If there are a few members who know more about games from the start, let them make the first selections and then branch outward

as comfort levels change. If no one has any expertise, use the companion website to this book (www.playlikeafeminist.com); it offers several games and a possible order to play them in. I list several of these games below, although the website supplies longer descriptions, discussion questions, and links to more information. As I finish writing this book, Apple Arcade has just been released, and for US$4.99/month, subscribers can have access to a small mountain of games. While this might be a great starting point, curation is still key to finding the right selections. Additionally, it is important to not be platform exclusive unless all group members have access to that platform (in this case, all group members would need Apple technology).

I have tried to select games for my circle that defy expectations about video games. I also try to select things that are accessible on multiple platforms (at the very least, on Android and iOS). Moreover, the circle would work with members who all can access Steam, or have a Nintendo Switch or other console. I like to think that beginning with mobile gaming on our smartphones is the most accessible for many. When possible, try to remain platform agnostic.

The order of games that I coselected with my group was:

- *Florence*. This short story game is about finding first love. The entire game takes at most about an hour to play, so the buy-in time is not tremendous. Its use of "chapters" makes it easy to transition from a traditional book club to a game club.
- *Reigns: Her Majesty*. *Reigns* is a deck-building game where the player is put in the position of a never-ending stream of matriarchs. Players try to make the correct choices to stay alive; on "death," they are reincarnated into a subsequent matriarch and are once again faced with similar choices to get it right.

The primary mechanic (swiping right or left) is relatively easy to engage with (it gets a bit more complicated later in the game).

- *Monument Valley*. A puzzle game, *Monument Valley*'s play travels through Escher-esque castles, trying to position and reposition them to find one's way. The game is low on story, but the art and puzzles are breathtaking. For fans, there is also a sequel (*Monument Valley 2*).
- *Donut County*. This hilarious game has you play as a hole in the ground, growing larger and larger as you suck small and large items inward. It involves a weird, quirky story about a small town getting sucked into the holes, mean-spirited raccoons, pickles, quadcopters, and (ultimately) redemption.
- *Gorogoa*. This artful game-puzzle is constructed entirely of hand-drawn images that you can fall in and out of. Some of the puzzles are tricky, but the wordless story eventually comes to life on the screen in sublime ways.
- *Stardew Valley*. This is a world-building game, with several twists. The game involves things like farming, mining, and fishing—which sounds mundane, but magical realism gets added in quite consistently, and players can have relationships with nonplayer characters.

Try to alternate between more narrative-heavy and puzzle games, as different members are going to like different things. If after a time the group determines specific kinds of tastes (such as puzzle or narrative games), follow that rabbit hole. Try to pick inexpensive games for a smaller buy-in. Most of the games listed above cost under five US dollars.

Look for online lists and recommendations, but also continue to check http://playlikeafeminist.com for updates on new games

that could be successful for gaming circles. I would recommend not choosing games that are too long without discussing them in advance with the circle. For example, while *Broken Age* and *Life Is Strange* are both artful and would create good conversations, they require some intensive time commitments that the group may not be ready for.

Try to meet up at least once a month, building playtime in between games.

Rules of the Game

Here are some basic rules I try to institute in Athena's Gaming Circle:

1. *You don't need to finish the game if you don't want to*. People might have various phases of play. They don't need to finish the game to meet up again.
2. *If you need help, ASK*. There should be no judgment on ability in a gaming circle, and there are no stupid questions. If you are stuck, always reach out.
3. *Use a walk-through if you need to*. Using a walk-through for parts of the game (or even all of the game) is absolutely acceptable. The experience of play is personal, and many players have satisfying experiences with walk-throughs, which exist for a reason. Searching the name of the game and "walk-through" will likely render good knowledge bases in order to become unstuck.
4. *Not everyone will like every game*. It is acceptable to have differences of opinion or for some (or all) members to not like a game. In order to know what you like, you need to know what you don't like.

5. *Remember why you are doing this*. Everyone is doing this for different reasons, of course. But remember that your leisure, happiness, and sense of community is paramount to this exercise. Playing games should be fun; only continue so long as it remains so.

Tips on Meet-Ups

1. *Find good locations*. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to meet at coffee shops, board game cafés, or libraries, or rotate between your homes. To start with, find a location that makes the group the most comfortable and then grow from there.
2. *Come with questions*. Don't just wing it; come to the group with specific questions for conversation. The companion website (http://playlikeafeminist.com) lists several games and possible discussion questions. Try to ask questions that will spur debate about the story, play elements, or design of the game.
3. *Nurture disagreements*. Everyone will not like every game. If participants disagree, try to figure out what core distinctions between you might draw you to different kinds of games.
4. *Find language for what you like*. The companion website offers some language to help you figure out how to better talk about what you like in terms of genres, mechanics, and styles. Try to use this industry language, particularly when reporting back to game companies and posting on social media about your experiences. Using industry-specific language can only help games get better.

5. *Build community*. Keep reaching out. Keep asking yourselves about how you pull leisure into your life and want to see it in the future. Consider doing other community-building activities with your group, such as board game nights and "escape-the-room"-type experiences. This group can help you go beyond just digital games, and be a way to think about leisure differently with your friends and loved ones.

Spreading Out

After you make your gaming circle, talk far and wide about your experiences. Use the hashtag #GamingCircle and #PlayLikeA Feminist on social media. Tell game companies that you are using their games and what the group thought of the games. The more we talk about this and the more feedback we give, the more video game companies will continue to support pushing the boundaries of what games could possibly be.

Of course, there are a lot of things within these practices that make constructing gaming circles inaccessible, especially in terms of social class. Not everyone can afford smartphones and games. And games take time—time that someone working multiple jobs might not be able to fit into their lives. But as I outlined in chapter 2 of this book, leisure need not be a zero-sum game. We need to be class conscious when thinking about leisure practices, but we can also start with our own lives, and subsequently find ways to fund, help, and improve the leisure of those who might not find these things as accessible. It is up to all of us to continue to think about the importance of our own leisure, and then use this knowledge to improve the play of those around us.

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Conclusion

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