

Shira Chess, **Play Like a Feminist**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020, 184 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover).

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In **Play Like a Feminist**, a book in MIT Press's *Playful Thinking* series, author Shira Chess positions play as a "core feminist issue" (p. 6). Across the course of the book, Chess makes a compelling case for expanding the boundaries of play beyond the confines of the gaming world and allowing feminism to seep beyond its often sombre political margins into video games. The playful, she argues, is political.

Chess is acutely aware of the misogyny long woven into the fabric of gaming culture, the densely populated discourses of sexist representations in games, and the industry's tendency to view women as "a genre, as opposed to a market" (p. 119). Addressed to the triptych of feminists, gamers, and feminist gamers, this book acts as an antidote to dominant negative discourses of sexism in gaming. Chess instead focuses on the positive (but not positivist) assertion that play should be considered not only as an essential form of feminist joy, but as a form of power that "can find new strategies for overcoming political and cultural oppression" (p. 7).

In her introduction, Chess outlines her response to the question of why the issue of play should matter. Chess cleverly draws from the many past critiques of sexism in gaming to show that gaming does in fact need feminism. Moreover, she argues that if play has the power to reproduce marginalizing power structures—as the plurality of critiques of video gaming would suggest—it similarly has the power to disrupt those structures. Thus, Chess positions this book as both a call to action and a tool for disruption.

Chess begins chapter 1 by outlining play and its relation to gender. She deconstructs the phrase "play like a girl" and the many gendered meanings it has come to embody. For some, this phrase is used insultingly; for others, it is used to empower. Chess posits that neither use is productive and ultimately reinforces harmful gender and sex binaries while simultaneously erasing the play of nonbinary, intersex, and transgender kids. Instead, Chess suggests using the titular phrase "play like a feminist."

Chapter 2 shifts the focus from play to leisure, which Chess notes are similar but not congruent; play is a leisureful activity, but leisure is not always play. Chess emphasizes the necessity of leisure time and the pleasure it can bring; however, in the Global North, access to leisure time differs greatly depending on your positionality, making leisure—like play—political. She stresses the importance of championing leisure beyond the self. As a means of prioritizing leisure time, Chess suggests it be "pwned"—derived from "owned," it is a word used among gamers when one player utterly defeats their opponent—and proposes five different methods by which feminists might pwn their own leisure.

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Chapter 3 approaches activism with a playful lens: Chess argues that play spaces can become ground zero for cultivating joyful and effective activism, and she suggests two different types of games that could be potentially incorporated into protest: the Alternative Reality Game (ARG) and the Greatest Internet Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen (GISHWES). Both games are interactive and collaborative forms of play wherein the real world is used as a game board and the players' ideas and actions can shape the course of gameplay, making these games "ripe with activist potential" (p. 77). She points out several examples of ARG games that have successfully leveraged their style of play to engage players in real-world activism. An example Chess uses is Colleen Macklin's ARG *Re: Activism*, wherein players are asked to gather at specific urban locations where previous political action took place and are challenged to recreate those actions in the present.

Chess returns to the digital game medium in chapter 4 to argue that video games are a prime location for feminist disruption. She argues that the industry's history and culture of misogyny have proven that video games have the capacity to produce potent narratives and representations that reinforce structural inequalities; however, this also means they can work in the opposite direction. Pointing to several successful examples of feminist narratives in existing games, Chess proposes that video games can act as "agentic-training tools" to assist in the attainment of social change and equity in the face of systemic oppression (p. 101).

In chapter 5, Chess draws from her personal experiences with and research on gaming circles as a form of feminist disruption. Like the sewing circles or book clubs that inspired Chess, gaming circles prioritize feminist play while simultaneously building community among game players and providing them with a space to formulate ideas for actionable change. This resistance is perhaps small, but it is not unremarkable.

Chess reiterates the importance of leisure and play for feminists in her conclusion. The phrase "play like a feminist" is a high-spirited but uncompromising call to arms that reminds feminists to make space for leisure, play, and joy—not just in their own lives but in the lives of those who are less able to access leisure time. The book is also accompanied by an appendix that acts as a blueprint for readers who wish to start their own game circles.

Play Like a Feminist is a fresh and vibrant intervention in a well-trodden subject area. Dominant discourses around gender and gaming have tended toward the negative and harmful—and for good reason. As Chess points out, the events of Gamergate continue to echo through the gaming industry, and "the toxic forces that have deliberately pushed out feminine influences" still run rampant in gaming culture (p. 3). However, the unfortunate result of writing and researching around this focus is that it tends to center misogyny and marginalize feminist play. This is not to discredit this past work; rather, it is to posit that the field could benefit from work that champions more optimistic paths toward a better future in gaming.

Enter *Play Like a Feminist*. It is precisely the plurality of research and information about this subject that allows the author to claim that gaming needs a productive feminist disruption. However, Chess opts to follow a newer path, which has resulted in an invaluable playbook that can act as both a manifesto and a blueprint for disruption of sexism in video game culture.

Chess is very careful and pointed in avoiding some of the shortcomings of feminist movements past and takes an intersectional approach to leisure, play, and gaming. It is this application of an intersectional lens that produces an incredibly salient argument: the fight for leisure equality. Chess suggests feminists move past the neoliberal imperative of self-care and instead invest in community care as radical acts of leisure. In a Fannie Lou Hammer–esque call to action, she suggests that no leisure time can truly be enjoyed until the systems that prevent others from accessing leisure are dismantled. In other words, none of us can enjoy leisure until all of us can enjoy leisure; thus, it is imperative that we do not just advocate for but also actively work to help carve out and support the leisure time of those who struggle to incorporate play into their lives.

This is a radical statement and one that is necessary to the work that feminism must do in the video game industry, which is why it is strange that Chess deviates from this in chapter 4. Chess makes a bold declaration: “I want to destroy the video game industry. Not to see it gone forever . . . to see it rise like a phoenix into a new form that lights up the world with its fury” (p. 105). However, she locates the means to destroy the industry in market power: “The only way to reconstruct this mass medium, is by overwhelming it with new kinds of consumers” (p. 87). Yet, the market is itself a key tool in the reproduction of patriarchal structures and fundamentally incompatible with radical change. Moreover, is viewing women as a market that much better than viewing them as a genre? Under this lens, women are still reduced to a homogeneous group stripped of agency beyond buying power. This argument falls flat and seems somewhat out of place in an otherwise radical vision for the future of feminist gaming.

Nevertheless, this is an outlier in an otherwise necessary text. On its own, an argument for the diversification of the video game industry and the elimination of toxic gamer culture would not be particularly novel; however, paired with the argument that games themselves are ideal spaces for developing and subverting relationships to power beyond game spaces, *Play Like a Feminist* is downright rebellious. Chess deftly connects how video game mechanics that allow players agency to make decisions within the game’s structures can help feminist players understand their own agency with an oppressive patriarchal structure, thereby cementing this text as more than just a book: It is a subversion of oppressive boundaries, a manifesto, a rallying cry. It is energizing to see the potential that play offers channeled into a blueprint for actionable change.