

**Review: *Play Like a Feminist*, by Shira Chess.
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In recent years, scholars have increasingly considered the role and place of social justice in video games, placing a notable emphasis on feminism and the representation of women. In *Play Like a Feminist* (2020), Shira Chess reimagines gaming as a feminist practice, and evaluates the place of gaming within feminism and that of feminism within gaming. Throughout the book, she takes care to relate to three audiences: the feminist, the gamer, and the feminist gamer. She hopes that by the end of the book, those who belong to one of the first two camps will actively consider what it means to be part of this third audience. She writes to compel readers who identify as feminists but not as gamers to rethink the value of play in their lives, and to help those who identify as gamers but not as feminists to better understand how embracing a feminist perspective might improve video games. Chess calls upon readers who already identify as feminist gamers to aid upon “improving the play of those around [them] who may not be there already” (p. xi).

As part of the *Playful Thinking* series, which focuses on “playing more thoughtfully and thinking more playfully” (p. ix), the book prioritises accessibility in its approach to examining intersections between feminism, play, and video games. This can be seen in how it is helpfully split into short chapters with a comprehensive section on how the book is organised, and in its conversational writing style, which is inviting to those less familiar with academic texts. The introduction, “Why Feminism and Why Play?,” covers the importance of the coexistence of feminism and play, where Chess states that the book rests on a few central premises, one being that “video games—and play more generally—need to matter more to feminists” (p. 1). Chess writes to convince feminists that video games and feminism (and play) should not only coexist, but that they should be symbiotic, like how chocolate and peanut butter culminate in a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup (p. 2). Although Chess addresses different audiences throughout the book and markedly does so in different sections within chapters (such as “Why Feminism Should Matter to Gamers”), she

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writes in such a way that never alienates one audience or states the obvious to another.

Play Like a Feminist importantly does not make the medium of video games its centre, but rather centres what play can do for the feminist movement on both a macro and micro level. Chess initially centres play as a concept unattached to any specific medium, until she moves towards the specifics of video games. Beginning her argument with framing play as a feminist activity allows Chess to later make the case that feminism needs video games. In the “Why This Book” section, she frames the book as being “about play for those who are skeptical about playing” (p. 13). Play can be decoupled from video games, but video games cannot be decoupled from play as a feminist practice, as the reader learns in the next few chapters.

In the first chapter, Chess breaks down the insult “playing like a girl” and the way in which the act of playing like a girl is constructed. She discusses the notion that if “playing like a girl” can be used as an insult, it means the play is less worthy and that girls are “less fun.” However, the significance of girls’ “reduced capacity” to have fun is challenged when Chess asks the question “is fun necessary?” (p. 26). Until this point in the book, she resists defining play and does not do so until the end of the chapter, using Salen and Zimmerman’s (2003) definition of “free movement within a more rigid structure” (p. 304). Here, Chess explains that using this definition allows us to use the concept of play in ways that go beyond games—she mentions the play of musical instruments and wordplay, for example. She uses Salen and Zimmerman’s definition specifically because it “adheres most closely to the play [she envisions] for feminists” (p. 39). The idea that play does not necessarily encompass fun is an idea that may be challenging at first, especially to those new to game studies. However, in order to use play in disrupting the status quo, fun must not be the be-all and end-all. Play as a disruptive practice challenges the assumption that fun must be the dominant outcome, which is expanded on in Chapter 3, “Play to Protest.”

The conversation Chess opens about play in Chapter 1, about freedom within structure and having “rules to push back at,” allows for a discussion about differences between leisure and play, and the importance of leisure in living a feminist life, in Chapter 2, “PWNing Leisure.” She asserts that “play is an activity done *in* leisure time” (p. 45, emphasis in the original) and is a specific activity, whereas leisure is a state of mind, inferring that play is a subset of leisure. Essentially, “leisure is the time one must carve out in order to play more” (p. 46). However, there is arguably still a need to interrogate the role of fun in relation to play. If play is a subset of leisure and play is not necessarily about fun, is this true of leisure, too? In a holistic sense, leisure is anything that is not work—it is adult recreation, and recreation is defined as activity done for enjoyment when one is not working. Work takes many forms—when you come home from work and do chores such as cleaning, that is still work—but Chess

reasserts that it is the state of mind that separates work from leisure, the idea of “free time.” The word “leisure” originates from the Latin *licere*, meaning “to be permitted” or “to be free.” At the analytical level, leisure is about the time itself (time that not everyone has, Chess points out), which is what enables the state of mind—not about the activities that one does within that time, whether they are fun, playful, rejuvenating, and so on. Via the framework Chess uses, we can attempt to conceptualise that leisure and self-care are not the same. The tagline of Chapter 2 is “play is not frivolous; leisure is important” (p. 43), but what does that mean for types of play that may not be considered “meaningful”? This issue also arises with anything that is not considered a “specific actionable event” (p. 45), which is how Chess defines adult play rather than child’s play.

When Chess encourages the reader to go “beyond self-care, embrace meaningful play,” what she is arguably missing is that people cannot embrace meaningful play without true rest, even if the idea of self-care does “offset corporate responsibility for toxic environments and places them back on the individual” (p. 59). Even in a utopia, people need forms of rest that do not use the energy that play requires (sleep notwithstanding), which would be self-care. Self-care should have connections to leisure, but “going beyond self-care” (p. 59) is only possible when a base level of self-care exists in a way that is not viewed through the lens of aftercare. Play can be a part of self-care, but it cannot be all self-care, since play has ties to both leisure and work, which Chess expands on in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 analyses how play works as protest. With the definition of play at hand as freedom within a rigid structure, Chess envisions “play as protest” to be about thinking inside the box of our world in outside-the-box ways. It is the limits of our imagination within the structure we are given that determine what play, games, and the people who play them are capable of—“reimagining the boundaries of society” (p. 69). She argues that for protests to be engaging, mobilising play is essential, and gives numerous examples of when mobilising play has been extremely successful, such as the Barbie Liberation Organisation, the “pussyhats” worn at the Women’s March at Washington DC in the United States, and even flash mobs.

It is only in Chapter 4 that Chess returns to video games, which she sets up with the discussion of play beforehand, as mentioned above. She calls for the destruction of the video game industry and rebuilding a better one in its wake, which once again borrows from Salen and Zimmerman’s (2003) definition of free movement within rigid structure. Chess explores feminist games as games that engage with agency and empathy, and that “surpass the expectations we tend to have of those ushered in to and for patriarchal audiences” (p. 96).

Play Like a Feminist is an excellent introductory text to the intersection of feminism, play, and video games. The questions at its crux are “What does it mean to play like a feminist, why is this important, and how can

we achieve it?" Ultimately, Chess resolves that playing like a feminist means to use play as disruption to a) reimagine gaming that upholds equality, agency, and anti-patriarchal narratives; and b) play more, a resolution suggested by her son and one that underpins Chapter 5, "Gaming in Circles" (where Chess proposes practical guidelines for how women can make time for gaming in a way that feels right). The book feels like an older sister to Chess's more theoretical 2017 work, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*, and will undoubtedly continue to encourage the reimagination of feminist games and play.

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