

How to Play a Feminist

By Shira Chess

This is not an essay about women. This is an essay about gender, about equality, and about the politics and power of play. More importantly, this essay is about feminisms.

Because feminisms don't play.

Feminisms work. And then work more. Feminist work is occupied with women's rights: in homes and in offices, with bodies, with technology, with health, and with politics. The feminisms of the past three hundred years have all been inextricably entangled with these matters of gravity and importance. As such, there has been no playtime 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 a playful (and play-filled!) feminism.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues about 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" (4). I would like to suggest that the politics of play is part of this complicated relationship between women and feminism. Representations of women as frivolous have created feminisms that often resist play, but women are not, by and large, unplayful. Instead, representations of femininity and feminism often are. At the same time, representations of feminisms are primarily unplayful and limiting.

There is a power to play: it is infectious, unifying, and gratifying. As such, play can be a tool, a source of agency for feminists and activists to drive forward a stagnating political movement that has been trapped in cycles of serious self-importance, a work-obsessed feminism that has forgotten the value of frivolity. In the following I will be analyzing a complicated relationship between feminism and play. I will illustrate how authorized forms of feminine play (such as shopping and consumer play) are often marginalizing. At the same time, I will also show how feminine play is often decoded as

“frivolity.” This image of feminine frivolity is something feminisms have been trying to bypass for hundreds of years—and, thus, feminism and play are often at odds with one another.

Specifically, in this essay I discuss how some of the theoretical aspects of masculine styles of leisure and play are often at odds with feminisms. Further, I illustrate how this complicated relationship between femininity and play has caused feminisms to often respond negatively to playfulness, discouraging what is interpreted as behaving frivolously. Finally, I will offer ideas about the value of more playful feminisms—both as an activist movement and as a cause unto itself.

In this essay, I envision a feminism of play that has two primary goals. First, a playful feminism can be an advocate for feminine play—something currently sorely lacking. Second, I see play as a potential tool to reignite activism in the feminist community. While these two things are very different, they emerge from the same core: both are affected by a dearth of feminine play. Ultimately, I propose that locating and embracing feminine play can help to engender both better conversations about leisure and equality, and a better means to have that conversation.

“How About a Nice Shopping Game?”

As I do not wish to be essentializing, myself, I make no assumptions about how individual women chose to play. Instead, my focus is on gender assumptions about feminine play and masculine play. And while individual play styles may wildly vary, feminine play styles do not. In turn, cultural assumptions about feminine styles of play naturally become enfolded into expectations of how women are expected to play. While feminism may not (as Butler suggests) be about women, and while femininity might not always map to women, these things easily become tautological loops of essentializations.

In many ways, this project began with my mother. My academic research in gender and video games has often led me to use my mother as a guinea pig (as a captive audience, she often has no choice!). Like many other baby boomer women, she has never expressed any interest in video games, and one day in my frustration with her total indifference, I finally blurted out, “What kind of video game would make you *want* to play?”

She paused. “How about a nice shopping game?” she asked, earnestly.

I wanted to be surprised at this remark, but I wasn’t. In the three-plus decades I had spent getting to know my mother, I realized, shopping was how we most often spent time together. For instance, when I, or my cousins, or her sister, would come for a visit, we would ritualistically scoop up my grandmother, so that three generations of women could go wandering around the shopping mall, looking for bargains at Macys, trying on lipsticks, and eating at the food court. This realization was unsettling, and yet I knew that my experiences of shopping-as-play were in no way unusual. Cultural assumptions of feminine shopping as play and sport are constant and consistent in the American cultural landscape. This is not to say that I am condemning consumerism or women for taking a part in it. It would be hypocritical of me to suggest that I am at all above sneaking away to Target for my play breaks from hours of work.

But the more I thought about this comment, the more uneasy I became. Seeking another opinion, I asked a colleague what my mother said. “A shopping game? Wouldn’t that be E-bay?” she pithily replied. Indeed, I realized that gendered digital play, from video games to the internet, often takes on this consumerist guise. I soon became attuned to the word “play” and its uses in feminine spaces. I found it often in cosmetics and skincare departments, and in advertisements promoting gigantic sales where women could go on shopping sprees. It began to seem to me that, within assumptions of femininity and generalizations about women, play is often inextricably linked to shopping and consumerism. And while masculinity is certainly not excluded from the shopping-as-play paradigm, there is an overabundance of stereotypes involving femininity, leisure, and shopping. On several occasions women have confessed to me a great distaste for the shopping rituals of Western femininity, but then almost always quickly add that they feel that not enjoying shopping makes them less feminine. To a similar end, men that I know that enjoy shopping often confess embarrassment of enjoying this supposedly feminine pastime.

And, in kind, these anxieties are often reflected in feminist thought. In *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas discusses the complicated relationship, perceived by many feminists, between women and shopping. Douglas suggests that advertising and media in the 1980s (and beyond) used feminist rhetoric to promote beauty and shopping to women.

According to Douglas, the advertisements suggested that, “The ability to spend time and money on one’s appearance was a sign of personal success and of breaking away from the old roles and rules that had held women down in the past. Break free from those old conventions, the ads urged, and get *truly* liberated: put yourself first” (246, author’s emphasis). It would seem that consumerism is one of the most sanctioned feminine forms of play, and yet it is economically marginalizing as an integral part of consumer culture.

To some extent, this obsession with shopping can be understood in terms of Althusser’s definition of interpellation. According to Althusser, individuals have a distinct relationship with ideologies. He suggests that individuals are hailed by ideologies, which (in turn) makes them a subject of that ideology. Althusser contends that while individuals are “always-already” subjects of their ideologies (84), being hailed involves a moment of recognition. Althusser illustrates, “There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’ One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (86). In effect, Althusser is suggesting that the interpellation process is thoughtless and immediate—the “Hey You” is automatically interpellated and thus becomes part of how subjects understand themselves. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler takes Althusser’s interpellation a step further by suggesting that gender itself is interpellated. She relates this back to the moment of being born, when it is declared, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” She explains:

Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an ‘it’ to a ‘she’ or a ‘he,’ and in the naming, the girl is ‘girled,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (7-8)

Thus, per Butler, the interpellation of ideologies in general is simultaneously enfolded into the interpellation of gender ideologies. Just as the “it’s a girl!” moment helps the process of “girling” and constructing femininity in its always-already status, mass media and popular culture constantly reaffirm what it is to be a girl or a woman.

If play can be understood as an ideology, then perhaps this gives us a clearer picture of how feminine play often turns into shopping and consumer culture. This is not to say that men do not shop, but media portrayals of masculine shopping and leisure are not nearly as embedded in the ideology of play. Along these lines, my mother could not possibly have thought of a video game other than “a nice shopping game.”

Masculinity, it seems, have more authorized, more playful kinds of play, ruling the domains of sports and video games—what can be called agonistic play. Masculine play often involves gatherings of men playing and watching sports, or playing and watching video games. Agonistic play—while competitive—comes from the Greek root which is slightly different from *antagonism*. It is about the camaraderie of competition. Whatever complaints one might have about steroid use in sports, or violence in video games, these things seem to be only byproducts and anomalies. Masculinity, it seems, is permitted to define play.

Femininity is often left out of the game entirely.

Instead, feminine play is often decoded in terms of the aforementioned shopping fetishes. In Firat’s quote from above, she uses the word “frivolity” to describe what is often interpreted as women’s obsession with shopping as leisure. This word is an important one, and I will later show how it has haunted feminist rhetoric for hundreds of years. Interpellations of women in terms of shopping and beauty often maps to feminist fears that women won’t be taken seriously, and instead seen as purely frivolous. But frivolity has its place. In Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play* he writes of frivolity, “No theory of play would be adequate if it did not leave scope for its own deconstruction and distortion into nonsense. Any earnest definition of play has to be haunted by the possibility that playful enjoiners will render it invalid” (213). According to Sutton-Smith frivolity is the tool that will help us to better understand the core nature of play.

Playing with Play

Johan Huizinga, one of the most prolific sociologists to ever write about play and games, wrote in *Homo Ludens* that play is a “significant function” of human life, and that “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). If what Huizinga says is true, if play is a significant, undeniable, and vital function of human life, then it is important to examine it. And, if what I propose is true, if femininity is at odds with this significant function, then there is a serious problem with frivolous repercussions (or vice versa!). Further, if femininity has such an ambivalent relationship with play, then we must ask how this has ultimately affected feminist thought—both in terms of advocating leisure and as a means of activism.

But what do I mean by “play”?—a term that I have been tossing about loosely (until now) in this essay. Play is very neatly and cleanly defined by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play* as “Free movement within a more rigid structure” (304). While this definition might initially seem simplistic, it is its simplicity that allows it to be understood and negotiated into a variety of contexts. While their definition works for game-play, it also encompasses imaginative play, word play, and playing an instrument. The inherent tension between freedom and rigidity becomes the compelling part of this definition, and perhaps a useful means of understanding things that are not necessarily automatically understood as “play.” I will later return to the power of play, and the usefulness of this broad definition in terms of feminist activism.

Studies of women and how they spend their leisure time also sheds light on feminism and play. While my focus is more about gender, leisure studies have often addressed the topic in terms of sexual difference: they consider how women spend their leisure time and the specific ways that this leisure time is often overwhelmed by non-leisure themes such as work, housework, and family. While, as I have already stated, my focus in this essay is on gender and feminism and not on women’s specific practices, leisure studies is one of the only areas of inquiry that has put any attention towards feminine leisure practices. Thus, because feminism and femininity often map back to

women’s practices these things all become inextricably linked. This essay is not about women, but in order to understand the tumultuous relationship between feminism and play it is necessary to examine the equally problematic relationship between women and play.

According to research on women and leisure, one of the key issues is time: either too much or not enough. With many women still juggling the so-called “double shift” of managing the work world and the home world, women’s leisure often plays out in snippets of time: knitting, television watching, and shopping are frequent culprits of stereotyped feminine play activities. This kind of play never becomes fully immersive and is about wasting time and filling time, not necessarily about having real and full leisure time. Women’s play is often also about making families happy: engaging in other peoples play.

In her recent essay “Feminism and Leisure Studies,” Rosemary Deem has rather keenly synthesized the problem with women and leisure: while many feminist scholars have taken some note of an unequal leisure situation, it is difficult to know what to do with this information in order to correct it. Deem explains, “There is much discussion about the importance [...] of gender ideologies but little attempt to explore how these actually work in the field of leisure” (265). This observation seems to be at the heart of the problem. While feminisms have started dialogues about problems in work, home life, politics, and health, issues of leisure have not been treated with the same weight. This tenuous relationship between femininity and play, I would like to suggest, is inextricably linked to the past three hundred years of Western feminisms.

Feminisms and the Politics of Play

While all women are obviously not necessarily feminists, and all feminists are obviously not women, the tenuous relationship between femininity and play has often been mirrored in a tenuous relationship between feminism and play. As already noted, these tensions often found form in rhetoric against “frivolity.” But as also noted, frivolity has importance and value, and to better understand this complicated relationship between women, feminism, and play it becomes essential to explore some of this rhetoric.

To be clear, this survey is by no means comprehensive, and cannot possibly touch on every Western feminist rhetorician and activist and their relationship to play. A book would be necessary to cover this ground. Instead, I am (admittedly) cherry-picking a bit here and selecting voices that reinforce themes of negating frivolity. This focus on frivolity is, to a large extent, out of necessity. Showing examples of how something does not exist is a difficult task. But in my research I began to notice references to frivolity and infantilizing women and felt that, in many ways, this contributed to rhetoric that does not generally support leisure and play.

Many of the early feminists (such as Mary Wollstonecraft) through the American First Wave of feminism (the suffrage movement) all the way through Simone de Beauvoir were trying to make women appear *less* frivolous: their social reputation was entirely linked to frivolity. For example, in her *Vindication on the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft writes that men view women as “a swarm of ephemeron triflers” and that they are “reckoned a frivolous sex.” This sentiment (and resentment) continues through many early feminist figures with detrimental repercussions. Often frivolity was overtly eschewed in these discussions about women’s rights. In order to show their equality to men, women overcompensated for frivolous reputations and downplayed play.

Later, these issues were echoed in the American suffragist movement. Because the primary issues for suffrage involved political and educational rights, many of the important speeches and writings of the period focused on intelligence—or rather, whether women had equal intelligence to men. For example, in the *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her suffragist cohort said, “Men, bless their innocence, are fond of representing themselves as beings of reason, of intellect, while women are mere creatures of affections” (Stanton, 47). Similarly, in her “Discourse on Women,” Lucretia Mott explains:

The kind of homage that has been paid to women, the flattering appeals which have too long satisfied her—appeals to her mere fancy and imagination, are giving place to a more extended recognition of her rights, her important duties and responsibilities in life. (74)

Thus—similar to Wollstonecraft—Stanton, Mott, and other key members of the suffrage movement are primarily fighting a reputation that biologically designates them as frivolous: permanently incapable of making the adult decisions that men make. It is the driving need to combat this reputation of being emotional, frivolous, and childish that was essential to the women’s movement of that time period. But, just as with Wollstonecraft, the negation of frivolity led to an eventual dissonance between feminisms, leisure, and play.

Admittedly, the leisure opportunities that were available to women in this period were only questionably playful. In her sociological study of American women (slightly before the suffragists), Harriet Martineau suggests that these feminine leisure activities primarily serve practical purposes and are ultimately shallow. She explains, “As for the occupations with which American ladies fill up their leisure; what has already been said will show that there is no great weight or diversity of occupation” (Martineau, 139). Thus, by Martineau’s assessment, American women were just as limited in their leisure activities as they were in their working activities. Often, these activities were bound by a “moral” sense as a compass for leisure. Martineau remarks on this, but more from a sociological sense than a feminist stance.

After the First Wave (and approaching the beginning of the Second), Simone de Beauvoir broaches these topics of play and leisure, but only slightly and primarily in reference to children. According to de Beauvoir, while boys are taught more competitive play styles from early childhood, girls are given play activities that “initiate” them into their “destined sphere” (281). According to de Beauvoir, play and leisure for adult females does not particularly improve, either. Because women’s leisure relies, in part, around the schedules of husbands and children, or the drudgery of housework or menial jobs, women’s leisure time is more about wasting time and pleasing others. Beauvoir describes the everyday plight of the married woman as constantly waiting for her husband to return home from work, only to be greeted by the disappointment it brings because of boredom and shallow intimacies. She explains, “The evening is dull: reading, radio, desultory talks; each remains alone under cover of this intimacy. The wife wonders, with hope or apprehension, whether tonight—at last—‘something will happen.’” (475). While this discussion of leisure is notable, she does not elaborate to

great lengths or prescribe solutions. More importantly, these remarks are not necessarily addressed by the Second Wave feminisms that were so deeply influenced by her.

As such, Second Wave Feminisms largely abandoned this topic, focusing instead on serious causes: birth control, pro-choice, and advancing women in the workplace. And while these topics are all vital and necessary to furthering feminisms, they left little time for leisure: getting women into the workplace didn't disintegrate their responsibilities at home, and this killed any possible hope for promoting playtime. These Feminist texts didn't generally discuss women and leisure: they were too busy trying to get the serious stuff down.

For example, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan explains that, post-suffrage, women were tricked by popular media back into a frivolous stance, pushing them to embody a mythological femininity as “the happy housewife.” Of these portrayals she remarks, “The image of women that emerges from this big, pretty, magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (83). It seems that despite the hard work of the suffragists and feminists in the early part of the twentieth century, Friedan shows that women were once again portrayed with the childlike image of being necessarily frivolous. And, just as her predecessors, Friedan's call to arms involves dispelling this myth through career, through activism, and through stronger identity formation. But while these are logical and noble responses to being treated frivolously by men, there is no discussion (or understanding) by Friedan that frivolity might have its purpose too, in the form of play. Just as previous feminists, Friedan's depiction gets so caught up in the image of creating serious women (to be reckoned with), that the identity formation of these women does not include room for play.

The one obvious exception to this would be rhetoric supporting Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. Title IX is best known as legislation to give equal funding to women's sports, although it encompassed significantly larger territory than this.¹ While this struggle was important, the pro-Title IX rhetoric primarily advocates very specific *kinds* of play. This is obviously out of necessity as Title IX, while broad,

¹ Title IX states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Ware 3). As such it included all federally funded activities, but was most notorious for giving equal funding to women's sports teams.

was limited in its scope. A feminist stance regarding a right to play and leisure needs to be even broader, including women who both are and are not interested in sports.

Additionally, The Second Wave is notable for its use of playful *tactics* in activism. While this was not necessarily widespread, groups such as WITCH provided a more playful *means* of sending out a message. In the next section of this essay I will address play as activism, but for now it is important to note that these groups, to the same effect, did not necessarily advocate equal play as much as they advocated equal pay.

After the Second Wave, important voices such as Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf continued to overlook play. Faludi, for example, fell into the trap of many of her predecessors, overcompensating for perceptions of feminine frivolity. Similarly, in Wolf’s well-known book *The Beauty Myth* she takes on the seriousness of beauty, but does not recognize the problematic relationship between women and play within this equation, nor does she suggest alternative modes of beauty-related play. Ironically, she hits the nail on the head in her conclusion, asking:

Can there be a prowoman definition of beauty? Absolutely. What has been missing is play. The beauty myth is harmful and pompous and grave because so much, too much, depends upon it. The pleasure of playfulness is that it doesn’t matter. Once you play for stakes of any amount, the game becomes a war game, or compulsive gambling. In the myth, it has been a game for life, for questionable love, for desperate and dishonest sexuality, and without the choice not to play by alien rules. No choice, no free will; no levity, no real game. (290)

Wolf is absolutely correct in these assertions but there are still two major problems within her observations. First, she does not recognize that it is the problematic relationship between women and play that contributed to this phenomenon—that women are using beauty as a form of play and that this deeply complicates an already complex problem. Second, she offers no real answer or solution to how women *might* go about finding this playful sense of beauty. In many ways, Wolf creates an impossible paradox for women—one that can be seen reflected in the “nice shopping game” remarks my mother made.

The Third Wave of feminism has maintained these mixed messages about how women should play. While these younger feminisms no longer use the same tactics (such as fighting reputations of frivolity or getting caught up in moralism) in a direct way, these themes have become so embedded in feminisms for so many years that their affects are automatic and inherent. Feminists today still have a fear of not being taken seriously—perhaps not for the same reasons that Mary Wollstonecraft or the suffragists wrote of, but for new reasons that are just as pressing (for example, fighting media impressions that “feminism is dead”). Conversely, many feminists today still hide behind the moral righteousness that is allegedly inherent in femininity—perhaps not with the same kinds of topics as the severance movement, but still with the same tone of many feminists past. Today’s feminisms need to reclaim play.

As Sutton-Smith suggests in his writing about frivolity as a form of play, frivolity is a valuable means of understanding the very nature of play itself. Frivolity has value. Instead of seeing frivolity as a negative image for women, and damaging to the causes of feminism, feminists should embrace the nuances of frivolity. Next, I will show how play also has potential for new forms of activism.

Play as Activism

It seems only fair to ask how something as serious as feminism—or any activist cause, for that matter—can be benefited by more playfulness. After all, wouldn’t play and frivolity potentially only play down the seriousness of a cause? But play has power that exceeds its own boundaries—it is “free movement within a more rigid structure”—and if we were to consider the hegemonies and patriarchies of Western culture, it would seem that the definition of play that I have chosen (the notion of getting to move about freely) is precisely what feminist activists hope to gain. In essence, play spaces can become staging areas for feminist activism. This is something that groups such as WITCH began to experiment with in the Second Wave, and something sorely needed by today’s feminist movements.

As already mentioned, perhaps the most playful period of feminist activism to date was during the Second Wave. Activist groups such as WITCH used what can be considered playful tactics to carry out serious messages. 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:

The feminist embrace of “play” in the seventies and eighties has been far more prominent, primarily in two contexts: in debates over sexuality and in a radical feminist utopian vision. What unites these different concerns is their common emphasis on articulating and realizing women’s desires, freed from patriarchal oppression. The rhetoric of play in these two contexts has tended to come from different groups within feminism: utopian “play” from radical essentialist. “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. (481)

Indeed, protest-play such as the WITCH protest of the 1969 bridal show in Madison Square Garden had playful and performance-centric elements by setting free mice, wearing black veils, and chanting, “Here come the slaves, off to their graves” (Echols 97-98). The performance and creativity of protests such as this one has embedded power. Similar protests involved WITCH’s hex on Wall Street as well as the famous protest of the Miss America Pageant of 1969.

At the same time, this playful activism was only part of the Second Wave movement, and was not often replicated. Additionally, it was often and easily conflated with much harsher (and less successful) attempts of activism during that era. SCUM (or the Society for Cutting Up Men) most obviously sits at this precipice between playful and non-playful feminisms of this era. Valerie Solanis’ famous SCUM Manifesto articulates much of the second wave frustration. In it Solanis writes:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex. [...] The male, because of his obsession to compensate for not being female combined with his inability to relate

and feel compassion, has made the world a shitpile.

(Solani 514-515)

While obviously this manifesto is to a large extent tongue-and-cheek, it simultaneously draws an unplayful line in the sand. Solani's SCUM Manifesto manages to be both playful and unplayful at the same time—the Manifesto rhetorically plays with (and turns around) past sexist assumptions to show its problematic nature, but at the same time appears unwavering and inherently morally superior. Further, one might even suggest that documents such as the SCUM Manifesto helped to carve an unplayful image of feminism (intentionally or otherwise) that filtered into future generations. Similarly, groups such as Cell 16 radical feminism helped to construct non-playful images with their journal, *No More Fun and Games*. The message of abandoning play became an implicit part in how the public, the media, and many feminists themselves came to understand feminism. While the playfulness of WITCH may have been a useful tactic, the seriousness of groups such as SCUM and Cell 16 is the image that stuck. These small pockets of play that were found in Second Wave were, in large part, unfortunately lost by many of the post-feminist voices of the early 1990s.

In WITCH's demonstrations, they created what I would characterize as a magic circle of play. Salen and Zimmerman use this idea, loosely borrowed 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 (95). In discussing these boundaries they explain:

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. (95)

There are numerous aspects to Salen and Zimmerman's description of the magic circle that are compelling to my discussion of feminism(s) and their relationship to play. The magic circle is a space where participants are able to work with rules that

are alternate to what might occur in real life. By “stepping in” to the magic circle, the players are neither complying entirely to their own rules nor are they simply obeying the rules of a game, there is a tacit agreement with the other players (or with themselves) that certain boundaries are to be maintained when existing in this alternate space. Thus, the space constructed by magic circles of play helps to create a staging area, where alternative rules and alternative realities are accepted and negotiated.

Play-as-activism is powerful because it can be overlooked by those who are not in the magic circle—as a separate space it provides both freedom and privacy from the hegemonies that guide culture. Treating play as activism (and activism as play) can provide a powerful tool for feminists to push forward a cause that has lain stagnant for many years. Live public play spaces need to be constructed specifically for women to facilitate community, solidarity, and dialogue. These spaces can be non-serious, non-threatening and not already overrun by masculine play. With the growth of networked gaming, these public spaces are opening up into virtual spaces, creating limitless possibilities for potential forms of playful activism.

Through play, feminist activism can find a new kind of power. The ambivalence of feminisms towards play has ultimately limited feminist causes. The seriousness and non-playful activist approaches have long given fodder to conservative pundits. Playful activism can begin to combat this image, and prove media depictions of stringent and frigid feminisms wrong. Play is power.

Conclusion: The Playful is Political

Playful does not mean dismissive. Frivolous does not mean ignorant. Embracing one of these things does not automatically mean being associated with the other. Instead, it means that, along with gravity and importance, we must embrace the ridiculousness and lightness of a cause. Along with work we must make time for play. Play is not just for children: masculinity has long integrated play into the everyday and until femininity follows suite (not through emulation but through experimentation) there will be no success in feminism.

Play can play two important roles within the feminist community. As I have demonstrated, it can be a means of activism and also take on a role of advocacy. If feminism, as an activist movement, uses more playful tactics then it is more in a position to be advocate for feminine play—a cause that (as I have demonstrated) is necessary and underrepresented. Our rhetorical style needs to mimic our causes.

We cannot possibly know, yet, what feminine play might look like. My mother is looking for her “nice shopping game.” At the same time *Bust* magazine has been pushing the “fiber arts” of knitting, crocheting, and sewing. But the “frag dolls”, the “riot grlls”, and women in sports all have different ideas. And all of these carry the old essentializations and baggage of the past few hundred years of feminisms. My point is not that any of these acts of play are wrong: but rather that feminists need to start examining play more carefully and examining how it can be used to subvert patriarchal norms, to promote equal rights, and to ignite new forms of activism.

Everyone knows that we live in a time of fractured feminisms. Through finding more feminine forms of play, and through embracing playful activism, feminism can make new headway. Play is unifying, powerful and strong, and although frivolous, play can have a purpose. Because the playful can be political, too.

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