How to Play a Feminist

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Feminisms don't play.

Feminisms work. And then work more. Feminisms are 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 (and further back) 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 how women play and how they spend their leisure time?

But it is time for a playful (and play-filled) feminism.

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.

And it is no wonder that the relationship between feminism and play is so separated and complicated: for (as I will show) the relationship between women, play, and leisure is equally tenuous. It would seem that it becomes a chicken-or-egg problem—feminisms don't play because women don't play, and women don't play because feminisms don't encourage it.

This project began with my mother. My academic interests in gender and video games have often led me to use my mother as a test-case (as a captive audience, she often has no choice!). Like many other women in her age group, she has never expressed any interest in video games, and one day in my frustration with her total dismissiveness, 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 in the food court. This realization was unsettling, and yet I knew that my experiences of shopping-as-play were in no way unusual. I know many women that use beauty and shopping as their primary means of play.

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 study. Or, for that matter, using shopping as a vehicle for befriending and getting to know new women in my life: I have done this many times and found it to be a highly successful practice.

But the more I thought about this comment, the more uneasy I became. Seeking another opinion, I told one of my professors what my mother said. "A shopping game? Wouldn't that be E-bay?" she pithily replied. Indeed, I realized that 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. Once I found it on a package of condoms being marketed to women. It began to seem to me that, for American women, play is often inextricably linked to shopping and consumerism. And while men are certainly not excluded from the shopping-as-play paradigm, there is an overabundance of stereotypes involving women, leisure, and shopping. On several occasions women have confessed to me a great distaste for the shopping rituals of American femininity, but then almost always quickly add that they are aware that not shopping makes them less feminine.

Men, it seems, have more authorized, more playful kinds of play: they rule 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 a 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 bi-products and anomalies. Masculinity, it seems, is permitted to define play.

Femininity is often left out of the game, entirely.

But play is a necessary component of human life. Johan Huizinga, one of the most prolific sociologists to ever write about play and games wrote in his seminal work *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" (Huizinga, 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 many women deny themselves this significant function, then this creates a real problem: we must dig deeper to understand the relationship between women and play. Further, if many women are denying themselves the pleasures of play, then we must ask how this has ultimately affected feminist thinking.

But what do I mean by "play"—a term that I have been using 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" (Salen and Zimmerman, 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 works for 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, but for now we will just stick to play within playful contexts—game play, imaginary play, role play, and various other forms of play with ludic (or game like) qualitites.

Play comes in multiple flavors, though, and at this point it might be useful to highlight a few of the relevant kinds of play, and what their potential value would be to women and feminism(s). So, to begin, I will first categorize three kinds of play: agonistic play, mimetic play, and community play. While, obviously, this is by no means comprehensive, it seems to at least be a useful starting point to understanding ways that women can get in the game.

Agonism, or competitive play, is what is most commonly associated with game play. In his book *Man, Play, and Games*, Roger Callois defines Agôn as:

> A whole group of games [that] would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should not confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. (Callois, 14)

Agonistic play is thus associated with sports, with most games (both board and digital), and with playful combat. Callois adds that the purpose of agonistic play is ultimately for players to assert (and have recognition for) their "superiority" (Callois, 15). Thus, the power of this kind of play lies in its competitive nature; but while it is about dominating a foe it is also about the friendliness of this competition.

But agonism comes full of gendered implications. According to Brian Sutton-Smith in his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, Agonistic play almost entirely implies masculinity in many cultures, where a "deific masculine resonance," (Sutton-Smith, 86) is given to competitive players. He explains that, "Until recently in Western society, and most other societies, women seldom had a place in these kinds of play. They were condemned to the presumed frivolity of their own lesser play forms"[1] (Sutton-Smith, 87). As implied by this statement recent sentiments about women and sports have shifted, slightly, and women are more often permitted into the hegemony of play in sports and other agonistic competitions. But there is still a massive gender gap, and, in large part, the justifications begin to sound tautological: women do not play competitively because there is no desire but cultural conditions help to deplete the desire from the situation.

Another form of play that is relevant to gender and women's studies is what Callois refers to as play of mimicry. This is the form of play that involves playing pretend, dress-up, play-acting and masquerade (Callois, 20-22). This form of play is far less gendered, and at the same time, according to Callois, is not only dependent on the skills of the player, but on the suspension of disbelief of the spectator. Thus Callois explains:

> Mimicry is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor's fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the decor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than itself. (Callois, 23)

These notions of mimicry and playing pretend have different kinds of implications when understood through the lens of feminist studies and gender studies. First, in many ways, mimicry has become a very acceptable form of feminine play. From girls playing dress-up and pretend to female actresses to

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[1] Coincidentally, it is this very "frivolity" that will come into play later, when I look at play in feminist theory.

the overzealous mimicry of drag, mimicry as play does not carry the same social stigma as agonistic play, for women. In fact, one might even conclude that the aforementioned beauty-as-play and shopping-as-play paradigms are adult offshoots of childhood mimicry play—dress up turns to consumerism and imitation into beauty products.

But there is another implication to the acceptable status of mimetic play for women—if one reads Judith Butler's theories about gender performativity into notions of mimicry play, they become anything but playful. Per gender studies the mimesis involved in feminine play could potentially take on serious implications. In *Gender Trouble* Butler suggests that we perform "words, acts, gestures, and desire" (Butler, 173) in order to produce identity performances that are "always already" (Butler, 11) a part of how we interpret our sex. Thus, she explains:

> That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart form the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. (Butler, 173)

Thus, to consolidate Callois' notion of mimetic play and Butler's concept of performativity, one can draw an uncomfortable parallel between one of the chief play styles that is acceptable (and necessary) to stereotypes of femininity (through dress-up, shopping, and makeup), and simultaneously the structured femininity of how we understand gender. If women are expected to play mimetically through clothing and beauty, this form of play begins to lose the value of its frivolity.

Mimetic play can also perform values which are significantly less problematic, though. Mimesis is a token to how we might understand playing with identity: and it is through identity and identification with others that mimetic play begins to have a core value—both as play and as a rhetorical tool for empathy with others. For instance, in *Life Beyond the Screen*, Sherry Turkle discusses how identity role-play (gender and otherwise) in Multi-User Domains (MUDs) is an effective tool for learning to empathize with others (Turkle, 211). Thus, play of mimicry does not always have to be wrought with implications that are troublesome to feminisms—it can be a form of play that is both useful and enjoyable—and, for those reasons, worth pursuing.

The final form of play that has particular value to this study is what I will call community play. This form of play is not specifically referenced by Callois (though he alludes to it in each of his forms of play). Conversely, Brian Sutton-Smith's description of a "Play of Identity"[2] fits nicely with what I would

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[2] While Sutton-Smith refers to this as "identity play", I choose to call it community play in order to draw a distinction between the identity play involved in the aforementioned mimetic play. While these two

like to identify as community play. In *The Ambiguities of Play*, Sutton-Smith explains, “The rhetorics of identity focus on the use of play forms as forms of bonding, including the exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community” (Sutton-Smith, 91). Thus, to Sutton-Smith, the rhetoric of identity play involves the identification between the individual and the group. While, obviously, to a certain extent community play can overlap with both agonistic and mimetic play, it deserves its own category for how community often relates to feminine play. While on one hand, it would be simplistic to essentialize women to simply liking the social aspects of play (which is often the case in studies of gender and video games), at the same time it would be unfair (and unwise) to discount the significance of community as it relates to gender and play.

Studies of women and how they spend their leisure time also sheds light on issues of gender and play. While the categories of play that I described above indicated some specific topics which might be useful to women’s studies and feminism, leisure studies have often addressed the topic directly but from another angle: they consider how women spend their leisure time and the ways that this leisure time are often overwhelmed by non-leisure themes such as work, housework, and family.

Women’s play and leisure are most often linked to time: either too much or not enough. With many women still juggling what has often been called “the double shift” of managing the work world and the home world, women’s leisure plays out in snippets of time: knitting, television watching, and shopping to name a few alleged 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. Playing with one’s children or taking on a husband’s leisure hobbies does not allow women to ever really *own* their play.

The necessarily distracted nature of female leisure practices is not only a part of the working woman’s life, but also part of the housewife routine. In *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Tania Modleski discusses the interruptible nature of one of the more popular forms of feminine television of the late twentieth century: the soap opera. Modleski remarks that the soap opera format is particularly built around how women’s leisure is necessitated. Thus, a woman watching a soap opera will find:

> Revelations, confrontations, and reunions are constantly being interrupted and postponed by telephone calls, unexpected visitors, counterrevelations, catastrophes, and switches from one plot to another. These interruptions are both annoying and pleasurable: if we are torn away from one exciting story, we at least have the relief of picking up the thread of an unfinished one. Like the (ideal) mother in the home, we are kept interested in a number of events at once and are denied the luxury of a total and prolonged absorption. (Modleski, 101)

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categories overlap a good deal, it seems useful to also differentiate certain aspects of them for the purpose of this study.

According to Modleski, then, the soap opera and similar feminine television styles cater to women through interruptible plotlines. But Modleski only addresses that this is the primary mode that many women must partake in their leisure practices: she does not remark upon the significance of interruptible leisure. Thus, when interruptability becomes a necessary part of play it can never be fully enjoyed and women's leisure can never be entirely immersive.

In a recent essay "Feminism and Leisure Studies," Rosemary Deem has rather keenly synthesized the remaining problem: 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" (Deem, 265). This observation seems to be at the heart of the problem. It is my belief that part of the problem with women and leisure is negotiated by popular feminist rhetoric. While feminism(s) have prescribed a variety of answers and solutions for problems of work, home life, politics, and health, issues of leisure have not been treated with the same weight. This tenuous relationship between women and play, I would like to suggest is inextricably linked to the past three hundred years of Western feminisms.

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 early feminisms with detrimental repercussions: feminists eschewed frivolity and often pushed an equally biological deterministic position of seriousness and morality. In order to show their equality to men, women overcompensated for frivolous reputations and downplayed play.

Because the primary issues for the suffrage movement 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. (Mott, 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 women and their relationship to play and leisure.

More recent feminisms—the Second Wave and beyond—similarly focused on serious causes: birth control, pro-choice, and getting women into 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 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 her famous book *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 the problems to being treated frivolously by men, there is no discussion (or understanding) by Friedan that frivolity might have its purpose too. 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 popular feminist voices of the early 1990s—such as Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf—continue this theme where work is the central focus of their feminist theories, and discussions of play are negligible. While not refuting Faludi or Wolf's arguments, I submit that neither of these feminist icons address play in their philosophies or rhetorical styles: their stances are decidedly unplayful. Faludi, for example, falls into the trap of many of her predecessors, overcompensating for perceptions of feminine frivolity. Similarly, in Wolf's well-known *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. (Wolf, 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. While it is easy to say that women need to treat beauty as a form of play, if they already do (but perhaps not in the way Wolf implies here) this becomes an impossible endeavor.

The alleged Third Wave of feminism has maintained these mixed messages about how women should play in a man's world. One article on gender and video games in a recent issue of *Bitch* magazine, by Jacqueline Lalley discussed the potential relevance of video games to girls and women. In this article Lalley explains her recent fascination with the topic:

> But one recent argument that has succeeded in convincing me that more girls and women should be playing games: Critics such as Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, have cited empirical evidence that playing video games develops our "cognitive muscles." In other words, gaming makes you smarter, according to standardized measures in the areas of problem solving, abstract reasoning, pattern recognition, and spatial logic. (Lalley, 44)

This is a perfect example of feminist rhetoric completely missing the point regarding play. Yes, video games can increase cognitive abilities and make you "smarter." But that is not why women and girls should be playing video games—they should be playing them because they are *fun.* If the only reason for play is as a means for work, it loses its impact and relevance as play. Video game play is only one example of this kind of missing-the-point rhetoric: many of the younger feminists might be venturing towards playful paths, but they will continue to miss the point if they do not understand the usefulness of play for play's sake.

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 taking 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. None of today's feminists make room for play.

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 the boundaries of play—it is "free movement within a more rigid structure"—and if we were to consider the hegonomies 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.

In addition to their useful definition of play, Salen and Zimmerman also suggest the notion of a "magic circle" of play (an 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 (Salen and Zimmerman, 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. (Salen and Zimmerman, 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. Just as a court jester can jokingly make fun of a king because of his playful circumstances, activists can playfully discover ways to meet their own needs through play spaces. 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.

Through play, feminism(s) can find a new kind of power. And through play, women can discover new means of personal freedom.

But still, many feminism(s) maintain a serious stance. While the term "feminazis" is abhorrent, one might wonder if a "nazi" surname could possibly be attributed to a more playful feminism. The immovable strictness of feminisms and the inability to embrace the necessity of frivolity has ultimately limited feminist causes. If women can't play equally then there is no hope for being taken seriously.

A quote commonly attributed to anarchist feminist Emma Goldman is, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!"[3] This is a sentiment that many feminists still desperately need to embrace: stamping and stomping will only get a cause so far and at a certain point it is necessary to embrace the cause—frivolity and all—and turn stomping into

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[3] This quote was a paraphrase of other things Goldman said, but the pithiness of the line and sentiment is what has survived (and what is still quoted today), so it is what I am quoting here.

dancing. While women of the past have been accused of being purely frivolous, it is this very frivolity which is missing from feminism today.

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: men have long known how to integrate play into their everyday lives and until women learn to play as men do (not through emulation but through experimentation) we will not understand the freedom that so many feminisms have sought to bring to femininity.

We cannot possibly know, yet, what a playful feminism might look like. While the women from *Bust* magazine have been pushing the "fiber arts" of knitting, crocheting, and sewing, the "frag dolls", the "riot grrls", and women in sports all have different ideas. And none of these are necessarily playful feminisms: they are all, to a large extent, imbued with old ideals and rhetoric. While the women of *Bust* have embraced the social play of Stitch-and-Bitch groups, some might suggest that knitting is simply a leftover form of play that is potentially problematic on several counts. While members of all-girl online gaming groups such as the Frag Dolls or the PMS Clan have certainly pushed their way into the masculine video game space, they are not necessarily involved in inherently *feminine* forms of play. While my mother and her friends might find their play in shopping and beauty spas, one might question if this consumer-driven activity can ever actually be play. My point is not that any of these acts of play are wrong: but rather that feminists need to start examining how women play, how often they play, how they play differently from men, and how to use play to subvert patriarchal norms.

We live in a time of fractured feminisms: women young and old, liberal and conservative no longer necessarily stand behind the zealous beliefs of First or Second Wave feminisms. Feminist rhetoric argues, fights, and no longer knows what it is fighting for or with.

Play is unifying.

Through finding more feminine forms of play women can finally grow comfortable in their feminist skin. Through agonistic play, community play, and mimetic play, women can come to know and understand one another and cut across the divisions: we are entitled to leisure, we are entitled to play, we are entitled to move beyond the drudgery of working the double-shift in order to understand the playful freedom that men have always had. Play is unifying, powerful and strong, and although frivolous, play can have a purpose. It is time to toss a Feminist Frisbee in the air, and see where it lands.

Because the playful can be political, too.

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