

# How to Play a Feminist

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## Introduction: Feminisms Don't Play

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 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. (4)

I would like to suggest that the politics of play is (a small) part of this complicated relationship between women and feminism. In the past, unfair representations of women as frivolous have created feminisms that often resist play. Of course, in reality, women are not, by and large, unplayful. Instead, representations of feminisms are often unplayful and limiting.

Being playful has power: 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 sometimes stagnating political movement that has been trapped in cycles of serious self-importance, a work-obsessed feminism that often forgets the value of frivolity. My analysis hinges on a complicated relationship between feminism and play. In this relationship, authorized forms of feminine play are often marginalizing, and at the same time often decoded as "frivolity." This image of feminine frivolity is something feminisms have been trying to evade for hundreds of years—and, thus, feminism and play are often at odds with one another. Theoretical aspects of masculine styles of leisure and play are often at odds with feminisms. This is further complicated when past feminisms responded negatively to playfulness, discouraging what is

interpreted as behaving frivolously. Ultimately, I offer ideas about the value of more playful feminisms—both as an activist movement and as a cause unto itself. Admittedly, there is an inescapable cultural bias to my analysis of play, leisure, and feminisms. This essay does not seek to impose my cultural bias on the play styles of the world but, rather, open conversations to how we understand play, femininity, and (of course) feminisms.

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 better conversations about leisure and equality, and a better means to have that conversation.

### **Consumerism, Play, and Femininity: “How About a Nice Shopping Game?”**

As I do not wish to be essentializing, I make no assumptions about how individual women choose to play. Instead, my focus is on gendered assumptions about feminine play and masculine play. And while individual play styles may vary wildly, 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.

An example from my own experience will serve as an example of this. 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 by this remark, but I wasn’t. I realized that in the three-plus decades I had spent getting to know my mother, 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 Macy’s, 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 work.

But the more I thought about this comment, the more uneasy I became. Seeking another opinion, I mentioned this to a colleague. “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. Within assumptions about 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.

Such anxieties are also often reflected in feminist thought. In *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas discusses the complicated relationship, as it is 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, advertisements commonly 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, original emphasis)

Similarly, associations between feminine consumerism and leisure are an unsurprising, and by no means new, area of scholarship. Shopping as leisure is a highly constructed category that has influenced (and been influenced by) our consumerist culture for over a century. For example, A. Fuat Firat writes of women and consumerism:

The female—specifically, in visual culture, the female body—became the representation of the feminine, which was the *ideal* consumer in Western culture. She “went shopping” while he worked. She spent his money or earnings. Her *frivolity* in buying and consuming became a major topic of jokes in the culture. She was such a consumer that he had always to restrain her appetite for consumables. (210, my emphasis)

In other words, my mother is not alone. In Western culture, shopping is constantly represented as an allowable form of feminine leisure. Firat's remark about the "frivolity" perceived in shopping-as-leisure is notable—it mirrors deeper implications about who is allowed to play in what ways, by gendered standards. 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 "girded," 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, according to 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 constructs femininity in its always-already status, mass media and popular culture constantly reaffirm what it is to be a girl or a woman. And that process of interpellation can undeniably be said to include play practices.

If play can be understood as ideologically driven, then perhaps this gives us a clearer picture of how feminine play often turns into shopping and consumer culture. Just as there is an always-already expectation aligned with “it’s a girl”, later in life that same girl is always-already expected to treat shopping as a leisure activity. Of course, 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, has more authorized, more important kinds of play, ruling domains

such as sports and video games—what can be called agonistic play. For instance, in terms of video game play, both Henry Jenkins and Derek Burrill refer to typical video game play as masculinity par excellence. Burrill specifically discusses ways that video games are playgrounds for the construction and performance of masculinity or “digital boyhood” (2), arguing that the player is “always already male” (138). Similarly, research on gender and sports often focus on the inherent masculinity in sport culture. Michael Messner refers to sport as a “contested terrain” in terms of sex, but one often dominated by “hegemonic masculinity, replete with its traditions of violence, sexism, homophobia, and militarism” (4). Surely, these are not one-dimensional spaces and many women have found success in them, but by-and-large they are still governed by masculinity. As such, 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 by-products and anomalies. Masculinity, it seems, is permitted to define serious play, while femininity is relegated the aforementioned category of frivolousness

Of course, agonism is not the only kind of play—but it is certainly a form of play that is given weight and importance. What is essentialized as feminine play is often typified as frivolous: flirtation, gossip, and (of course) shopping. 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 be 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 enjoinders 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. So it isn’t that women are stereotyped as never playing at all; but rather that their play is often taken less *seriously*. Feminisms (as I will explore later) are often portrayed as being entirely averse to play.

### **Defining Play and Leisure: 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.

Leisure can be distinguished from play to a certain extent. Leisure studies (mostly housed in sociology) tend to define leisure either in comparison to work, or else in terms of "leisure industries." Leisure studies topics tend to focus on several areas of inquiry, although travel and sports studies are the most common. For the most part, leisure can be understood in terms of a person's free time activities and a state of mind that goes with them (Parr and Lashua). So, in many ways, leisure is similar to play but at a slightly larger scope. Play is an activity done in leisure time—but by its definition also implies more freedom than leisure.

Studies of women and how they spend their leisure time shed light on the larger issue of feminism and play. Leisure studies usually addresses 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 paid any attention to 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 work and home life, in what Arlie Russell Hochschild refers to as the “second shift,” women's leisure often plays out in snippets of time: knitting, watching television, and shopping are frequently 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 people's play.

In her recent essay “Feminism and Leisure Studies,” Rosemary Deem has rather neatly summarized 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 get to the heart of the problem. While feminisms have instigated dialogues about problems in work, home life, politics, and health, issues of leisure have not been treated with the same weight. And yet, the complicated relationship between femininity and play, I would like to suggest, is embedded in the past three hundred years of Western feminisms.

### **Historical Contexts: Feminisms and the Politics of Play**

While all women are not necessarily feminists, and all feminists are not women, the tenuous relationship between femininity and play has often been mirrored by a tenuous relationship between feminism and play. As already noted, these tensions have often found form in rhetoric against “frivolity.” Therefore, as frivolity has importance and value, it becomes essential to explore some of this rhetoric in order to better understand this complicated relationship between women, feminism, and play. My selection below highlights themes of feminine frivolity. This focus on frivolity (as opposed to play) was, in part, out of necessity. Showing examples of how something does not exist is a difficult task but, at the same time, there are patterns. I did not have to go far to find references to frivolity and felt that, in many ways, this concept contributed to a 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) and all the way through to Simone de Beauvoir, were trying to make women appear less frivolous. 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 the writing of 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 were primarily fighting a reputation that biologically designated them as frivolous: permanently incapable of making the adult decisions that men make. It was 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 feminine leisure activities primarily served practical purposes and were ultimately shallow: "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.

After the First Wave (and approaching the beginning of the Second), Simone de Beauvoir broaches these topics of play and leisure, but not in detail 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). Play and leisure for adult females does not particularly improve, either. Because women's leisure relies, in part, on the schedules of husbands and children, and must fit around the drudgery of housework or menial jobs, women's leisure time is more about wasting time and pleasing others. De 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 writes, "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 (given the paucity of the topic in previous feminist rhetoric), she does not elaborate at great length or prescribe solutions.

More importantly, these remarks are not addressed by the Second Wave feminisms that were so deeply influenced by her. Rather, Second Wave feminisms largely abandoned this topic, focusing instead on serious causes: birth control, abortion, 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 did not diminish their responsibilities at home, and so killed off any possible hope for promoting playtime. Feminist texts did not 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.” 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 other feminists in the early part of the twentieth century, Friedan shows that women were once again portrayed as childlike and frivolous. And, like 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. As with previous feminist writing, Friedan’s depiction gets so caught up in the task of creating serious women that the identity formation of these women does not include room for play.

The one obvious exception to this would be the rhetoric supporting Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. This legislation is best known for seeking to give equal funding to women’s sports, although it encompassed significantly larger territory than this.<sup>1</sup> While this struggle was important, the pro-Title IX rhetoric primarily advocated very specific *kinds* of play. 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 even these groups 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 the problematic relationship between women and play has 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 touched on some of these issues, albeit often with mixed messages similar to those of the previous generations of feminists. In many ways, the Third Wave is about reclaiming individual narratives. In Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard’s *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, they suggest that it is attention to individual narratives that makes the Third Wave unique. They explain, “On every Third Wave Foundation membership card, for example, there is a place that asks, ‘My issues are...?’ and no two cards have ever listed the same answer” (47). Because a broader number of stories are told in the Third Wave, the space becomes more feasible for more narratives (both playful and unplayful) to be told. At the same time, the play and leisure of women is not a subject that *has* been focused on to any large extent in recent years. Perhaps many feminists today still have a fear of not being taken seriously—maybe 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”). The confluence of many voices in the Third Wave is ripe for discussions of equal play. Today’s feminisms need to reclaim play as an important facet of life. 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 is important. Instead of seeing frivolity as a negative image for women, and damaging to the causes of feminism, feminists should embrace the nuances of frivolity, and advocate play for all. Next, I will show how play also has potential for new forms of activism.

### **A Free (Women’s) Movement: 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” (Reference) —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. Salen and Zimmerman’s definition becomes particularly salient and useful when play is combined with activism. In essence, play spaces can become staging areas for feminist activism. This is something that some groups 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 through “debates over sexuality and in a radical feminist utopian vision” (481). He explains:

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 at the 1969 bridal show in Madison Square Garden had playful and performance-centric elements: activists set free mice, wore black veils, and chanted “Here come the slaves, off to their graves” (Echols 97-98). Creative protests such as these have the power to help people move beyond their typical ways of thinking. Similar protests include WITCH’s hex on Wall Street as well as the famous protest at the Miss America Pageant of 1969.

However, this playful activism was only a small 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 at activism during that era. SCUM (or the Society for Cutting Up Men) most obviously sits at this boundary between playful and non-playful feminisms of this era. Valerie Solanis’ famous SCUM Manifesto articulates much of the second wave frustration. 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. (Solanis 514-515)

While this manifesto is to a large extent tongue-and-cheek, it simultaneously draws an unplayful line in the sand. Solanis’ 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 the radical feminist Cell 16 helped to construct non-playful images with their journal, *No More Fun and Games*.

The message of abandoning play became an implicit part of 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 the Second Wave were, in large part, unfortunately lost in most 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, and 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 strikingly relevant 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 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 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.

As already noted, the Third Wave emphasis on individual issues and narratives is particularly primed for playful feminist activism. One possible means of doing this might be through what is known as Alternate Reality Games (ARG). According to Jane McGonigal, an ARG is:

An interactive drama played out online and in real-world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone. (qtd in Jenkins 250)

While many ARGs have been part of marketing campaigns in order to promote forthcoming products, this collaborative and social form of play is ripe with activist potential. On a smaller scale, Katie Salen's projects such as Karaoke Ice (a project where an ice cream truck had city dwellers sing publicly for their ice cream) or The Big Urban Game (where participants were asked to vote daily on the most efficient routes between changing

checkpoints in a city) (Salen) could easily model playful activism for younger generations of feminists. These kinds of projects are ideal for getting new people involved and reinforcing communities. It is time for this kind of newer, activist play.

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 online gaming, these public spaces are opening up into virtual spaces, creating limitless possibilities for potential forms of playful activism. Virtual game worlds such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* only begins to suggest the possibilities that are opening up through internet gaming.

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 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 feminism needs to do the same (not through emulation but through experimentation).

Play can adopt two important roles within the feminist community. As I have demonstrated, it can be a means of activism and it can 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 advocate for feminine play—a cause that (as I have demonstrated) is necessary and underrepresented. Feminist rhetorical style needs to mimic feminist causes (or, to put it simply, we must practice what we preach).

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 grrls,” 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 Western 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.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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