

Shira Chess, *Play Like a Feminist*.

A call to arms for feminism, feminists and games players who might not be feminists but perhaps should be.

*Play Like a Feminist* comprises a number of linked position pieces which are intended to demystify the relationship between feminism and games. Shira Chess addresses a triumvirate of issues – the role of the feminist in gaming cultures, how feminist behaviour functions within games studies, and how feminists can reconsider their own role within and towards games. A preliminary section acts as an explainer, locating feminist thought alongside games and gaming. Targeting three such disparate audiences is bold and potentially extremely broad, but Shira Chess sees each group as providing a collective way forwards when considering games and argues that all aspects need to combine in order to start remaking the industry effectively. This is a hands-on process – she argues persuasively that feminists need to play games as well as think about and create them. Without engaging with leisure, she argues, we are excluding ourselves from the medium we seek to change.

The relationships between feminist play and gaming are not sugar coated. Chess directly addresses some of the more toxic responses to feminism in the gaming sphere over the last few years, moving beyond the more binary ‘games are sexist’ arguments to examine a more complex environment. She discusses the impact of #gamergate, and the legacies it still brings to the industry and its players. A lasting effect has been a residual damage to understanding how representation and diversity engage with gaming, and a misunderstanding of what feminism and activism in games entails. This confusion about the role of feminism has slowed the process of welcoming diverse players in many places. Her discussion of feminism therefore aims to include rather than reject or delineate. She welcomes intersectional feminism into the gaming sphere at a time where trans and non-binary lives are often presented in gaming realms as somehow antithetical to this debate, or are subjected to exclusion, categorisation and dismissal. She also discusses how feminism is misrepresented as a boogie monster, when its aims are to welcome, broaden and include, not set barriers for playful lives. Whilst this isn’t a particularly new debate to feminists, it certainly needs restating when opposition and sometimes confusion are rife.

Perhaps the most important message of the book is the need for feminists to play more games. We deselect ourselves from gaming, Chess argues. There are a number of reasons for this. Feminist players often do not see the games that they play as authentic gaming experiences, or worthy of attention. Underscoring this is a culturally ingrained perception what makes a ‘gamer’, and what type of games they play – this has evolved into a situation where some arenas, such as AAA games, are considered games, whereas others like mobile games are somehow ‘not games’. Anyone who has grappled with teaching gaming genres to undergraduates will know just how nebulous and frustrating any discussion of gaming genre (a narrative, or a system?) is, but these blanket preconceptions remain within wider gaming cultures and media perceptions. If we’re not plugged into a console shouting expletives into thin air, then somehow we convince ourselves it’s not a gaming experience. In reality, the ESA has consistently reported females in their 30s to be the largest group of players, and one with huge commercial power. Feminists not only play games, but they play a huge variety of them that has repeatedly escaped attention.

Chess additionally notes that not only do players disavow their own play, but they also seek to trivialise or hide it. An overriding sense of guilt pervades this attitude: 'Feminists have work to do. We have too much work to make time for play' (6-7). She argues that this attitude is not only preventing feminists from making inroads in gaming cultures, but that enabling our own leisure is a central part of making play, and games, a more inclusive space:

Playing like a feminist is about making better leisure for all. Our job is enabling leisure – for ourselves and others. (58)

A central section discusses destroying the game industry. Sandwiched between advice about how to set up gaming groups and exhortations to play more games, this section seems perhaps a little at odds with the enclosing arguments. This is also possibly a result of the intent to hit the three different audiences stated at the start – when reading, I wasn't quite sure who this was addressing, and if so, what it really entailed. Whilst rebuilding power structures is an incredibly important aspect of regenerating the games industry, this particular section felt more adrift than some of the other arguments.

Chess also discusses the need to create spaces for feminists to play – both physical and virtual. Normalising play in a locative environment provides a visible place that echoes a sewing circle or book group and presents gaming beyond ivory towers or tournament arenas. This section also briefly case studies a gaming circle and the types of games that were used. It is fascinating – both in the choices of games and the cultural issues that surround it. Reading, sewing, knitting or discussion circles are notorious for their gatekeeping practices, so the techniques discussed in order to overcome this are an important reflection of the issues underpinning the book.

Overall this writing is needed, and it's important that voices like this challenge the games industry beyond more binary understandings of gender, feminism and activism. This has been boiling under for some time – change is most certainly happening, but analysis has been mired in traditionalist readings of these issues which rehash the same examples, case studies and tropes. It is refreshing to see *Play Like a Feminist* move beyond, and be unafraid to push these boundaries.

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