

**Chapter Title:** Introduction: feminist war games? Mechanisms of war, feminist values, and interventional games

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Can there be a feminist wargame?

*Yes.*

*No.*

*Obviously!*

*Absolutely not.*

*Possibly... ?*

*Feminist War Games? Mechanisms of War, Feminist Values, and Interventional Games* revolves around this critical question. This collection arose out of a panel by the same name that served as a conjoint keynote for the Digital Humanities Summer Institute, Electronic Literature Organization, and Implementing New Knowledge Environments Partnership in June 2016. Moderated by Dene Grigar (Washington State U, Vancouver), the panel featured a paper-length provocation by Jon Saklofske (Acadia U) and shorter responses from Diane Jakacki (Bucknell U), Elizabeth Losh (UC San Diego), and Anastasia Salter (U Central Florida). As that panel and the chapters that make up this collection indicate, there is no straightforward answer to the question of whether there can be a feminist war game; or rather, the volume provides a multitude of answers. In some ways, this is fitting for a collection that engages feminism. Not by definition, per se, but perhaps by concept, feminism has always been plural, intersectional, evolving, and contested.

The notion of a feminist war game brings many contradictions to the fore, and has led the authors whose work is included here to do significant thinking on how a war game might be considered feminist, as well as how feminist perspectives can impact a collective understanding of how war is represented in procedural spaces like playable games. Each author articulates what feminism is

to them in slightly different ways; for the purposes of this introduction, we will clarify how we are framing the question by drawing from contemporary accounts of feminism. Deliberately frank, in *Bad Feminist* (2014) Roxane Gay considers feminism as the seemingly simple belief that men and women should be treated equally. Vivek Shraya (2018) complicates such a conception when she expresses

a desire not only to reimagine masculinity but to blur gendered boundaries altogether and celebrate gender creativity. It's not enough to let go of the misplaced hope for a good or a better man. It's not enough to honour femininity. Both of these options might offer a momentary respite from the dangers of masculinity, but in the end they only perpetuate a binary and the pressure that bears down when we live at different ends of the spectrum.

In doing so, Shraya gestures toward expanding definitions like Gay's to include non-binary, two spirit, and all other gender identities and expressions beyond the limiting categories of 'men' and 'women.' Foundationally, though, both Gay and Shraya pursue notions of equality, and moreover equity, in defiance of a toxic masculinity focused on preserving privilege. On a similar note, for Erin Wunker a feminist is

one who recognizes that the material conditions of contemporary life are built on inequities of gender, race, and class. One who recognizes that patriarchal culture is inherently coercive and stifling for women and other Others. One who works to make those inequities visible and one who works to tear them down. (2017, pp. 25-26)

We consider such perspectives—in turns straightforward, fluid, and intersectional—as collectively identifying a necessary framework for the chapters that follow.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed calls our world ‘not-feminist and antifeminist’ (2017, p. 1). As Ahmed herself and the writers cited below demonstrate, there are numerous proofs for this claim. Women are frequently disadvantaged in ways that lead to stymied careers and lowered pay.<sup>1</sup> Sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, home, and on the street is rampant (Wunker 2017). Men are disproportionately violent, and women are disproportionately the target of this violence (Solnit 2014). In *I’m Afraid of Men* (2018), Shraya writes of her experience as a trans woman in Canada: ‘My fear of men is a fuel that both protects my body, as a survival instinct, and erodes it, from overuse’ (p. 9). As Rebecca Solnit acknowledges in *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014) in the context of the United States, ‘About three women a day are murdered by spouses or ex-spouses in this country. It’s one of the main causes of death for pregnant women in the United States’ (p. 6). Moreover, she claims that ‘So many men murder their partners and former partners that we have well over a thousand homicides of that kind a year [in the United States]’ (Solnit 2014, p. 23). Speaking on sexualized violence in particular, Solnit argues in *The Mother of All Questions* (2016):

Rape is so common in our culture it’s fair to call it an epidemic. After all, what else could you call something that impacts nearly one in five women (and one in 71 men) directly and, as a threat, virtually all women, that is so pervasive it modifies how we live and think and move through the world for most of our lives? (p. 91)<sup>2</sup>

Such a statistical rendering of the violence that women face—in Solnit’s account, in the United States—underlines Ahmed’s depiction of the world.

Mainstream videogames have been criticized, culturally, as promoting, reinforcing, and proliferating the very traits of violent and oppressive masculinity that are key factors in Ahmed’s

nonfeminist and antifeminist world, or in the rape culture Solnit writes of. This toxic masculinity of many videogames is not surprising, given that these games are the direct descendants of the table top war games developed to simulate military experience and command, and, as discussed by many of the authors in this volume, militarism and masculinity are inextricable. Whether one considers the chess-based *kriegsspiel* of Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as the first war game, as Christopher Kampe and Mark Kaethler do in this volume, or agrees with Matt Shoemaker that Georg Leopold von Reisswitz's entirely new *Kriegs-Spiel* of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was the first true war game, the connection between gaming and militarized masculinity is undeniable.<sup>3</sup> Some authors in this volume have chosen to define war games as strictly games about 'war', while others have used the term more loosely to encompass games that engage with the themes of violence and control, or the gameplay mechanics, of games based on war without actually being set in a scenario of armed conflict between nation states. In the popular *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, for instance, crime and violence are main goals. The consequences of such acts are not fatal, nor do in-game consequences dissuade such behaviour. Trying to escape from the police is 'fun' and chaotic, death is not permanent, and both capture and death result in only a small loss of the player's virtual money. The broader problem with games like *GTA* (and there are many games like this) is that consequences for player actions are usually not proportional to the moral weight or implications of behaviour, and thus accountability, thoughtfulness, and compassionate action are discouraged or even neglected entirely in the name of fun. This is compounded by the fact that the player-characters in *GTA* are all male, a design choice that centralizes, enables, and rewards masculine perspectives and associates pleasurable play with hypermasculine violence.

Many gamers have considered those who point out these kinds of nonfeminist / antifeminist elements in videogames to be killjoys, to be people who get in the way of fun. The reactive toxicity by misogynistic gamers towards such ‘killjoys’ too often manifests as real violence. For example, Anita Sarkeesian has been harassed, threatened, and doxed by fellow gamers for her feminist criticisms of videogames. As Solnit writes, in reference to Sarkeesian, ‘[Online gamers] are trying to silence and punish women for claiming voice, power, and the right to participate’ (2014, pp. 30-31)—for being killjoys. Ahmed reclaimed and popularized the (positive) conception of the ‘feminist killjoy’ on her blog of the same name and in *Living a Feminist Life*; Wunker picks it up in *Notes From A Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life* (2017). The figure has become a useful referent for people who ‘[name] the lack and [speak] the open secrets’ (Wunker 2017, p. 24) of patriarchy; that is, the lack of female representation and participation in public and private spaces, and the open secrets of harm done to those who identify as women. In this collection, Adan Jerreat-Poole also identifies and engages with the figure of the feminist killjoy. The feminist killjoy can be an important counterpoint to the closed-loop of dominant videogame culture, where game world behaviours reflect and reinforce the misogynistic perspectives that shape a dominant culture that consumes and pays for such media products.

Oft-cited mid-twentieth century game theorists posited games as establishing an alternative reality magic circle (Huizinga 1949) or as being make-believe by definition (Caillois 1961). More contemporary game theorists tend in the opposite direction. Ian Bogost argues in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007) that videogames are highly influential on players and their real-world perspectives; in *How To Do Things With Videogames*

(2010) he makes a claim for the broad reach and impact of videogames that goes far beyond more simplistic notions of leisure. Like any mediated representations, the mechanics and narratives of games can normalize, reinforce, and strengthen perceptual habits outside of the ‘magic circle,’ including misogynistic ways of understanding. In a 2006 collection Alexander R. Galloway suggests that games are a much more active cultural pastime than passive activities like watching television. By distinguishing the performative, participatory, and interactive aspects of games, Galloway points to a different kind of potential influence on players’ understandings. Jane McGonigal sees this potential as progressive, going so far as to assert that reality is broken and that designing and engaging with videogames are some of the ways we can build a better world (2011). Similarly, Mary Flanagan (2009) and Miguel Sicart (2013) advocate for values-based game design that can instigate critical-collaborative forms of play, extending the more constructive and thoughtful forms of design that McGonigal promotes in her work.

Many of the authors included in this collection also push against the notion that games are somehow separate from reality, or that they exist in or create an unreal, make-believe magic circle. In ‘Exploring Agency and Female Player-character Relationships in *Life is Strange*: What Choice do I Have?,’ Andrea Luc discusses how playing *Life is Strange* allowed her to reflect on how she deals with gender-based conflict outside of videogames. Games are not separate universes; what happens online or on-board bleeds into meatspace and has ramifications for how players view and interact with the world around them. Based on this concept alone, it would be easy to disparage the very existence of war games – predicated as they often are on violence and death – and to discount any argument that they might be feminist. If the boundary between life

inside and outside of games is really so porous, then the degree of violence in games could only be considered as unethical.

But games – and perhaps videogames in particular – are more complex than such a superficial reading. And so is feminism. There are two issues with the claims in the paragraph above; first, the assumption that all games reflect and possibly even incite violence, and second, the idea that feminism is equated with non-violence. Yes, war games have war as their subject, and so an element of violence is present. But games like *This War of Mine* acknowledge the violence of war without glamourising it; quite the opposite, as Ryan House and Christopher Kampe articulate in their chapters in this collection. In her chapter ‘Feminism and the Forever Wars: Prototyping Games in the Time of “America First,”’ Elizabeth Losh also explores how games about war like *Darfur is Dying*, *Hush*, *Syrian Journey*, and *Endgame Syria* do not shy away from the reality of a warzone, but focus on the lived reality for civilians. Of course, many games outside of the war game genre also do not prioritize the violence associated with war.

The existence of violent feminism is another topic of debate. For many, like notable feminist poet and scholar Audre Lorde, feminism should be fundamentally anti-oppressive (1984). It is not a far stretch from anti-oppressive to anti-violence, since violence – or the threat thereof – is so frequently the tool of oppression. Abolition activist and scholar Angela Davis has been outspoken in her condemnation of violence. When asked in an interview about earlier resistance to the validity or role of violence, Davis responds:

I was attempting to point out that questions about the validity of violence should have been directed to those institutions that held and continue to hold a monopoly on violence: the



police, the prisons, the military. [...] At the time I was in jail, having been falsely charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy and turned into a target of institutional violence,

I was the one being asked whether I agreed with violence. Very bizarre. (2016, p. 7)

Ahmed also warns against invoking righteous anger as a feminist. Admittedly, righteous anger is different than violence, but they are adjacent. On the risks of anger, she writes: ‘Our anger, when generalized against the injustices of the world, can become directed toward those who happen to be nearest, often those who are dearest’ (2017, p. 172). In this collection, Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson suggest that even the idea of a feminist war game is offensive because of the violence intrinsic to war, and especially since much war-based violence is enacted on female bodies.

Other feminists may experience anger and violence as redemptive, desirable, or powerful. Think of Russian feminist protest group Pussy Riot, refusing to let their anger about oppression be silenced. Consider Naomi Alderman’s 2016 novel *The Power*, where teenagers and then women learn how to harness their own bodies to electrocute men and systematically turn the world into a violent matriarchy. Look to *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* (2018), Soraya Chemaly’s recent book on embracing female anger as a tool for social change, or *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), where Brittney Cooper extols on the potential productivity of anger. Many of the authors featured in this collection align themselves with the potential of feminist aggression. Jerreat-Poole’s chapter ‘Gamified Suburban Violence and the Feminist Pleasure of Destructive Play: Rezoning and Warzones’ explores the satisfaction derived from violent destruction in playing games like *Life is Strange* and *Night in the Woods*. As they articulate,

Playing games may have an emotionally cathartic function for some players, but pleasurable fantasies of feminist violence do more than this. They validate our anger. They tell us that we should be angry. They tell us to hold on to our anger, to nurture it, and to use it. They show us that anger can be world-making. (Jerreat-Poole, xx – pg #)

In ‘Gendered Authorship in War Gaming: Whose Fantasy is it Anyway?’ Anastasia Salter riffs on her own experience as a child gamer playing the first person shooter games of her youth. Mark Kaethler explores the videogame inclusion of empowered, violent women in ‘Failed Feminist Interventions in *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*.’ Denying women the ability to be violent is also problematic, as Gabi Kirilloff argues in her chapter ‘Subversive Game Mechanics in the Fatal Frame and Portal Franchises: Having Your Cake and Eating it Too.’ As she astutely suggests, ‘*Fatal Frame* presents non-violence, or rather, constrained violence, as an intrinsic aspect of desirable femininity, rather than as an ethical choice’ (Kirilloff xx – pg#). Violence, for these authors, is not *necessarily* anti-feminist.

Throughout this collection the reader will also find recommendations for game designers to make more games that incorporate a variety of feminist values. For instance, in the context of *Dungeons and Dragons*, Salter throws her hat in with creating ‘space[s] more open to subversion of war norms and hypermasculine strategies and value judgements’ (xx – pg #). Similarly, Bath and Cockcroft challenge designers to create real alternatives to violent gameplay rather than just making not-killing yet another achievement for the expert gamer. Sarah Stang reflects on the kinds of decisions that go into creating a feminist war game at a 2017 game jam. Building on his historical recounting of the gendered nature of war game design and play, Matt Shoemaker

closes his chapter with a section titled ‘Deliberate Choice in Game Design’ – a roadmap for more inclusive design decisions.

We have grouped the chapters of this collection into three main sections:

- I. Play as Inquiry
- II. Feminism as War
- III. Challenging the Industry

Section I, Play as Inquiry, examines how engaging with wargames can be an explorative foray into questions of gender, femininity, masculinity, and violence. Section II, Feminism as War, showcases contributions that engage with the common experience of gender-based violence, and how such an experience interplays with games and gaming. Section III, Challenging the Industry, contains pointed looks at game mechanics and the larger game industry, and includes selections that both challenge the industry and suggest steps for proactive change. The tripartite framework encourages those who engage this collection to read across the varied content types included.

Contributions range from personal reflections to more objective essays, and each section includes a curated mix of these forms. In presenting the material in this way we hope to emphasize the multiplicity of the notion of a feminist wargame itself—this topic does not reside in a purely personal or purely objective realm, but rather brings to the fore questions of experience, agency, ethics, and intellectual engagement. The collection closes with a summative afterword by Flanagan, “Taking Binaries Off the Table.”

So can there be a feminist war game? Such a provocation is the guiding inquiry of this collection, tackled most directly by Jon Saklofske, Emily Cann, Danielle Rodrigue-Todd, and Derek Siemens in the opening chapter, which builds on the initial provocation of the 2016 panel that

inspired this collection. Why does it matter if there can or cannot be feminist war games?

Currently, many games and the cultures that they give rise to reinforce creative, kinetic, and non-critical habits that reproduce and reinforce stereotypical hypermasculinities when it comes to violence and war. This collection hopes to at least disrupt uncritical immersion in such problematic perspectives and invoke a necessary destabilization that resists both an easy retreat into exclusive habits of conventional perception as well as facile acceptance of unconventional challenges to such habits. To this end, we hope that the questions raised by the various authors in this volume will provoke thoughtful and progressive discussion and action between designers, publishers, and players regarding the ways that war is represented, practiced, and perceived in the participatory, interactive medium of games. Perhaps the reader will come to a more solid conclusion to the question of whether there can be a feminist wargame. For us, as co-editors of this volume, the answer still remains:

*Yes.*

*No.*

*Obviously!*

*Absolutely not.*

*Possibly... ?*

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Canadian Women's Foundation, on average fully-employed Canadian women make 75 cents for every dollar that fully-employed Canadian men make. Moreover, they claim, "Canada is ranked as having the 8th highest gender pay gap out of a list of 43 countries examined by the OECD, based on 2016 data" (Canadian Women's Foundation 2018).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the statistics Solnit quotes here represent *reported* rapes in the United States. Given the tendency to not report rape (and other forms of sexualized violence), it is assumed that there are many more rape victims than 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of the development of war games see Peterson 2016.