

# Games as Feminist Artefacts: Towards an Analytical Framework for Game Design

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## **Keywords**

feminist game studies, feminist HCI, intersectionality, game design, representation

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper asks: How can we read games as feminist artefacts, and what design principles can be extracted to guide feminist game-making practices?

Games are cultural artefacts that encode values not only through narrative but also through mechanics and systems. Bardzell (2010) argues that feminism is a natural ally to interaction design, with its commitments to agency, fulfilment, identity, equity, empowerment, and social justice. Reading games as feminist artefacts allows us to identify how values are encoded and how alternative, feminist practices of design might be cultivated.

Mainstream games frequently reproduce patriarchal, Eurocentric, and heteronormative logics. Patriarchal logics privilege masculine-coded mechanics of domination, conquest, and combat — cycles of violence that mirror militaristic patterns (Mama 2007). Eurocentric tendencies situate play in Western-centric histories, while the Global South is flattened or exoticised (Tamale 2020). Heteronormative defaults centre straight, cisgender, often white male protagonists, relegating women, queer, and trans characters to secondary or stereotypical roles (Shaw 2014).

This paper proposes an analytical framework to read games as feminist artefacts. Drawing from feminist technoscience, decolonial feminism, and feminist HCI, I show how feminist readings of games can go beyond representational diversity and instead attend to mechanics, systems, and situated worlds. The framework is then applied to a set of case studies, generating design insights that can inform feminist game-making practices.

## **THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

Feminist approaches to technology emphasise that design is never neutral. Haraway's 'Situated Knowledges' (1988) highlights that knowledge is partial and embodied; when applied to games, this means analysing whose perspectives are centred and which knowledges are validated. Suchman (2007) frames design as relational and political. Tamale (2020) argues for decolonising feminist knowledge, emphasising collectivity, ecology, and cultural situatedness.

Bardzell's (2010) principles of pluralism through multiple cultural perspectives; advocacy through centring marginalised voices; ecology through representing interdependence with environments resonate with Flanagan's Critical Play (2009), which frames games as sites of resistance, and with Shaw's Gaming at the Edge (2014), which argues that representation matters not simply in terms of presence but in how identities are situated and made playable.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) further clarifies how race, gender, and geography shape games' cultural work. In Nakamura and Gray's work, this is further extended to digital games, showing how race, culture, and gender intersect in representation and play. Together, these perspectives push us beyond concepts such as female protagonists towards systemic feminist analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

To guide this analysis, I draw conceptually from the MDA framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004), which distinguishes between Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. The paper employs close:

- Narrative: representation of adolescence, girlhood, motherhood, community.
- Mechanics and dynamics: caregiving, ecological repair, interdependence.
- Aesthetics and Worldbuilding: situated geographies resisting Eurocentric norms.

Inclusion criteria emphasise games situated in non-dominant geographies, centring community and ecological concerns, and resisting masculinist play logics. While casual games often employ feminised mechanics of care and repetition, they are excluded here due to limited thematic or narrative depth for feminist close reading.

## **CASE STUDIES**

The framework is applied to three primary case studies:

- Mutazione (Die Gute Fabrik 2019): a coming-of-age story centred on ecology and intergenerational healing.
- Never Alone (Upper One Games 2014): an Iñupiat girl and fox embody Indigenous storytelling and dual-character interdependence.
- Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus 2020): caregiving mechanics transform death into a relational, emotional process.

Secondary comparisons include Tchia (Awaceb 2023) and Alba: A Wildlife Adventure (ustwo games 2020).

Across these games, feminist potentials emerge through ecology, care, adolescence, and culturally situated worlds.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper demonstrates how games can be read as feminist artefacts through attention to narrative, mechanics, and worldbuilding. Case studies reveal shared characteristics such as care as mechanic, ecology as narrative driver, girlhood as site of resistance, and situated geographies.

At the same time, the emphasis on care requires caution. While care can resist masculinist logics of conquest, it may also reproduce patriarchal norms that confine women and girls to nurturing roles. Feminist game design must therefore ask whose labour is represented, how it is valued, and whether other mechanics such as collective resistance or intergenerational solidarity can expand beyond care.

The contribution is twofold: first, an analytical framework for feminist game studies; second, design insights for feminist game-making, including participatory storytelling, care-centred mechanics, and culturally situated aesthetics. Future work will develop this framework into a practical methodology for feminist game design and apply it in my own practice, including the development of Kamata.

## BIO

Neema Iyer is a game designer, researcher, and founder of STEMTo Studio. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, researching gendered gaming experiences and feminist game design. Her practice-led research integrates feminist theory, digital rights, and creative game-making, with projects including Kamata, Digital SafeTea, and Choose Your Own Fake News.

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