

The Inverse of Play: Self-help Games as Female-Coded Leisure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Eve Rodsky’s book—*Fair Play: A Game-Changing Solution for When You Have Too Much To Do (and More Life to Live)*—is meant to be purchased alongside a matching deck of oversized cards called *The Fair Play Deck* (2019). If you use the self-help book and card game combined, the marketing copy promises, you’ll find “a time-and anxiety-saving system that offers couples a completely new way to divvy up domestic responsibilities” (Rodsky 2019).

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The book, which is endorsed by Reese Witherspoon, begins with the kind of personalized storytelling familiar from self-help influencers. Rodsky writes of her frustration as a modern wife and mother, responsible by default for both the household labor itself and for all the invisible managerial work of homemaking. In response, Rodsky designed this game, wrote this book, and has since written another book (*Find Your Unicorn Space*), become the subject of a documentary, and received significant press attention.

To play, a domestic couple holds weekly meetings to “Build your Deck” (decide which tasks matter to one or both of you), “Deal the Cards” (assign each card to one partner, who will “Conceive, Plan, and Execute every aspect of the task to fulfill your family’s Minimum Standard of Care”), and finally “Claim Your Unicorn Space” (a single card dealt to each partner articulating a “passion or skill” they want to cultivate and will prioritize, with support from their partner). In terms of play-time commitment (one hour weekly, over a long period of time) and some mechanics (deck building, dealing, negotiating, storytelling), *Fair Play* resembles a tabletop game, but one focused on battles over housework rather than those taking place in fantasy realms.

Within the subset of tabletop self-help games that try to gamify relationship satisfaction, Rodsky’s *Fair Play* joins older projects that explicitly attempt to enable couples to relate more deeply to one another through a card game. The Gottman Institute, home of perhaps the most famous “research-based approach to relationships” offers multiple card decks designed to improve relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, or children. Through marketing copy like “don’t gamble on love” or

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“don’t gamble on your potential family,” it’s clear that these products are designed to exist somewhere within the discourse of games—repurposing the formal structure of a game of cards to the end of developing a better relationship, rather than having an enjoyable good time, while capitalizing on that familiar form to make a scary conversation seem lighter in intensity. And the gambling rhetoric is turned on its head; whereas one would step *away* from a card table in order not to gamble at poker, one must step *towards* the card table in order not to gamble at the game of one’s relationships.

Fair Play is no different. As the card deck’s rulebook promises, “Now that you’ve each committed to owning your tasks, you’ll feel more empowered as individuals and happier as a couple. A win-win” (Rodsky 2019). With hundreds of similar phrasings (throughout book and game) that cheerily appropriate the language of play but entirely lack its ludic spirit, the *Fair Play* system offers game scholars a fascinating object of study at the intersection of feminist gamer identity, self-help discourse, and serious card game design. To what extent is this game playable, enjoyable, or therapeutic?

Furthermore, how does the roleplay required in a non-fictional, self-help game relate to the creation and performance of a fictional tabletop RPG character? In a section titled “The Role We Play,” Rodsky writes feelingly of the loss of identity that follows motherhood:

“After having children, many of us feel that we’re no longer seen, *or no longer see ourselves*, for the vibrant individuals we are. Instead, we take on the corresponding identity for the various roles we now play: Spouse. Caretaker. Parent. Household Manager. List Maker...Consider what you were once known for among friends and loved ones, and how often do you identify yourself with that special something *now*?” (96).

Through undergoing her system, Rodsky suggests, unhappy women will be able to shrug off these onerous roles and instead create a version of themselves they like better. But in order to do so, they first must play this game—a kind of tabletop RPG—with a certain attitude. As Rodsky puts it, “FIRST...Get Your Head in the Game.” The instructions below, and the entire book that accompanies the card deck, dictate the empowered mindset with which the player must enter the game. Phrases like “all time is created equal” and “do not keep score” remind the player of the character they are creating—in this instance, one who believes her time is valuable and who does not scorekeep.

As Shira Chess argues in *Ready Player Two*, the games marketed to women and girls often reflect more about marketers’ and developers’ biases than about the kind of games any particular woman might independently choose to play: “The system suggests a condescending solution to the complex problem of leisure and diversification. It manages the potential of gender diversity by reaffirming common stereotypes about how women and girls are expected to play” (2017, 2–3). With *Fair Play*, the designed identity of the female gamer becomes more circumscribed and significantly less fun. While Rodsky’s game purports to enable women to “reclaim [their] Unicorn space,” it also presents them with a notion of “play” that is quite literally more work.

This paper draws from a broader project analyzing how the rules, toolkits, and boundaries of the 21st-century self-help industry help us think about the intersection between contemporary tabletop game design and contemporary popular self-help discourse.

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