

## Episode 2.7 Playing, Losing, Failing

March 2, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. so I've decided to try a little experiment over the next few weeks. I'm going to release a miniseries of sorts, a cluster of related episodes around a theme. That theme is play. So next week we're going to hear from Emily Riddle about women playing poker, and two weeks after that, Clare Mulcahy is going to talk to us about video games. Might even add a third interview about sports. Oh, roller derby! That's the answer. Okay. Guest TBD, but there's going to be an episode about roller derby. This is going to be fun. And in the spirit of talking about play, it's time to tell you about my secret feminist agenda: failure. There's a really particular reason why I often hate playing games and definitely hate playing sports, and that is that I really, really struggle with failing. I have historically been the kind of person who likes to do a good job, who likes to be good at things, who likes to be seen as being good at things. For me as a kid, that meant feeling really averse to sports because, let me tell you folks, I'm bad at them. At my absolute fittest. I didn't gain any hand-eye coordination. I have, at times in my life, been very good at running after the tennis ball that I cannot successfully hit, but I've never gotten good at hitting the tennis ball. I am uncoordinated. I am bad at sports. I find them frustrating. As an adult, it has been incredibly liberating for me to realize that there's a whole world of fun things that you're allowed to do that are non-competitive, that you don't actually have to be good at in order to enjoy, non-competitive games are part of that. I love a collaborative board game. I think this is a big part of why I have been so drawn to *Dungeons and Dragons*.

I, oh, future episode about feminism and *Dungeons and Dragons*, for sure. I think it's also why I'm drawn to things like recreational dance, where the point isn't to dance well, but just to dance with a great deal of sweaty enthusiasm. Honestly, if what you're being asked for is sweaty enthusiasm, I am absolutely there for it. But that's a different kind of solution, you know, finding things where the point isn't winning is a very different thing from getting comfortable with failure. A couple of years ago I read a book by Jack Halberstam called *The Queer Art of Failure*, which in a lot of ways has shifted my thinking on the topic. So in it Halberstam writes about how fear of failure discourages risk and I quote, "squashes, rather than promotes quirky and original thought" end quote. And then to quote Halberstam a little bit more, "Failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood" end quote. Interestingly, for me, what Halberstam describes here is kind of the opposite of my experience in some ways, actually as a child I felt terrified of failure, and as an adult have gotten a bit better at it. And I think a big part of what's helped me to get better at it is specifically some of the sort of queerness that Halberstam attributes to failure. So to continue on the same page, and this

is, to cite my sources, page three of *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam continues, "and while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative effects such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life." So what Halberstam is pointing to here is the way that our sort of obsession with positive thinking becomes a way of victim blaming.

People are blamed for failing at things in order to preserve this sort of neoliberal notion of perfect human autonomy. That if we all want success badly enough, we'll just get it. So understanding failure and how failure is unequally distributed across the world. Can help to sort of push back against that oppressive positivity. But there's also something in the idea of failure as a queer art that suggests that there's radical possibility in not just growing comfortable with failure, but actually embracing it and, and with the embracing of failure, finding access to what Halberstam called subjugated knowledges. So so different ways of being in and seeing and understanding the world, different kinds of stories about what the world is like that are not premised on these heteronormative white supremacist capitalist notions of success and what success looks like. And the book pushes back against the desire to reframe every version of being in the world as its own kind of success at it pushes back against the desire to always frame your life in terms of success and winning. It wants to think about why failure itself might have this kind of splendid potential in it. So you might, for example, think about the most radical versions of fat politics that recognize that thinness is framed as success but doesn't want to reframe fatness as success, rather wants to reframe fatness as a radical refusal to think about a body as a thing that can be successful or not successful in the first place. And so that becomes a sort of subjugated knowledge that the failure to have the right kind of body can open up for you. And I think that's what I'm trying to get at. I'm trying to get at the way that failure can open up for you aspects of the system that you're trying to win, that when you're winning at it, you don't see as well. You know, when a system's working in your favor, you often don't perceive it as a system at all.

Again, to sort of bring things back to the university, which is always my example cuz, it's always my context. The university, as an institution, privileges particular ways of knowing, ways of producing knowledge, ways of learning, ways of behaving. The classrooms are incredibly structured spaces, the norms of how courses are designed, the lecture model of delivering information, the essay model of responding to information, all of these things are incredibly restrictive systems. And if you are positioned to succeed within them, you often don't think of them as systems at all. You think of them as sort of neutral, just the way things work, just the way the university is, the way it's always been. Whereas failure, and in this case we can think about failure literally as in failing a course, can open up for you, the ways that those systems don't work, that those systems are rigged against people and that specifically they're rigged against people in systematic ways. Right? So we know that the sort of status quo of the university classroom privileges, people who, whose parents also went to university, who have inherited this sort of understanding of how those spaces

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work, privileges middle class, people privileges white people, privileges people who are neurotypical, privileges um, people without disabilities. And all of a sudden success maybe doesn't feel the same when you start noticing that and maybe failure doesn't feel quite the same either. Maybe failure all of a sudden feels like an opening up of a possibility of seeing things differently. I mean maybe, like maybe if you can survive the system that's rigged against you in the first place. But all of this is to say that both queerness and critical theory have for me opened up a different perspective on failure and success, on losing and on winning, which is not the perspective that I had as a child that just wanted so badly to be good and to be praised and to be doing things right.

There's something about the way in which my being as an adult is a failure that has liberated me into all kinds of failing, I think. Now when I say my being as an adult is a failure, what I mean to say is I'm a fat queer spinster who lives with two cats and all kinds of ways just not doing life the way I'm supposed to. That isn't to say that there aren't also other stacked games that I am winning here. But this is the sort of bring it back around to the queerness of failure and how queerness has helped to reshape failure for me so that all of a sudden I can see possibilities for enthusiastically failing, for enthusiastically being bad at things and how incredibly liberating it can be to not be fixated on winning and on doing things right all the time. Let me end by reading you just a little bit more Halberstam, specifically a couple of sentences about the great cinematic ode to failure. Quote, "Little Miss Sunshine relinquishes the Darwinian motto of winners— may the best girl win— and cleaves to a neoanarchistic credo of ecstatic losers. No one gets left behind. The dysfunctional little family jumps in and out of its battered yellow VW, and holds together despite being bruised and abused along the way. And despite, or perhaps because of the suicide attempts, the impending bankruptcy, the death of the family patriarch, and the ultimate irrelevancy of the beauty contest, a new kind of optimism is born. Not an optimism that relies on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists upon the bright side at all costs. Rather, this is a little ray of sunshine that produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends the meaning of the other." [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] All right, enough on failing. Let's go win listening to Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello, and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So this week I'm going to talk about the self care practice of saying no. In the past I've been really good at saying no, and one of the reasons I have been good at saying no is because I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself and my abilities and I was very, very nervous about making commitments and then failing the people around me. Now I have a lot more confidence. Thank you, roller derby. And I find myself taking on more things than I can always handle. And I think that's a pretty common experience. Lately I've made commitments that I kind of regret and I'm trying to come to terms with how to fulfill those and how to make them fit into my life. But I also wanted to remind you and my future self that saying no is a valid and healthy option. And it's not just good for you, but it's good for the communities that are asking work of you, because ideally the communities that

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you're a part of, ideally, do not want to suck you dry. They want you to be involved in sustainable ways so that you continue to be involved. And they want you to be excited about the work you're doing or at least comfortable and confident about the work that you're doing. And I know I'm talking about ideal communities, but if we don't talk about them, if we don't work towards them, they're not going to happen. So here is a little tip from a friend of mine, so my friend is involved in a community and she's finding the work really challenging and stressful and she doesn't want to take it on again. So she wrote herself a letter listing all the reasons why this work is not sustainable and why this community isn't a great fit for her and why she shouldn't commit to this work again. And she has that letter ready for when the community asks more of her. So I think this is really important. It's important to sit down and articulate why something feels like too much. Put those feelings on paper, get them out of your head and your body. But it's also important to have those reminders in the moment when you're being asked to give more because you are so caught up in the community's feeling of need and you're still caught up in your own feelings of obligation that you may say yes too hastily when you really do need to say no. Here is a shout out to saying no, and a gentle reminder that though you are a wonderful skilled, competent, knowledgeable person, we're not the only one who can do all of this work. There are other people who can take on these jobs, these opportunities, who can learn from doing this work just as you've learned from it in the past. And I know that doesn't always feel apparent, and sometimes it means leaving people in the lurch for a little while, but it's important. If you ever need encouragement and support and saying no, you know where to find me on Twitter. I got your back. So have a good weekend. Bye. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host): It is a truth universally acknowledged that you can find the show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, you can rate and review the show, and you should. You should tell a tree about how much you like it. You should whisper to the moon that it's your second favorite podcast after *Buffering the Vampire Slayer*. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. That's it for this week. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]