Episode 2.10 Fighting All the Scary Bad Guys in Video Games With Clare Mulcahy

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Hannah (Host):	[Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back. Listen, I know I always talk to you about being excited for episodes, but I'm really excited for this episode. That's because the person you're about to meet is someone that I've been trying to get on a podcast for a long time. I was editing this episode today and I kept thinking I should cut on some of his laughter or I should delete that. It's kind of an inside joke, but this record of the pleasure I experienced talking to one of my dearest friends was just too beautiful to me, so I left it all in. I hope you enjoy listening to it. I certainly did. So let's go meet Clare. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Clare Mulcahy holds a PhD in English with a focus on African American Literature and Periodical Studies. She is an instructor at NAIT in Edmonton, Alberta, where she teaches critical thinking and research, particularly surrounding issues of race and gender. Clare and I met in 2008 when we did our master's together at the University of Alberta, which means that this September is going to mark the 10 year anniversary of our friendship. Maybe if we're very lucky, we will celebrate by her fighting all of the scary bad guys in Ocarina of Time for me. One can dream. [Music: "High Rural Field Theme" from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*]
Hannah (Host):	So we're sitting here in your cozy home in Edmonton, the morning after a raucous wedding celebration.
Clare:	[Laughs]
Hannah (Host):	We've had, we've had some traditional morning after pizza. May or may not have successfully gotten all of our mascara off, and we're going to talk about video games. And this was one little piece of context I want to say that this episode was specifically recommended by our very own Kaarina Mikelson, who talks to Clare about video games a lot, she said, and really wanted everybody else to get to enjoy that experience.
Clare:	That is the greatest compliment that I could ever be given. I love it so much. All I want is for someone to listen to me talk about video games.
Hannah (Host):	Great. Well, it's all coming, it's all coming true. So let's start off with a little background. Can you talk a little bit about sort of what video games have meant for you in your life? Like you grow, did you grow up playing them? What kinds did you play? What role did they play in your family? That kind of stuff. Just all that stuff.

Clare: This just feels like, I'm like, I should be paying you to ask me these questions. Like, I feel like this is the setup because nobody wants to know these things, but I want to talk about them.

Hannah (Host): That's the secret of this entire podcast is like, giving feminists a platform to talk about this shit that they think other people don't care about. But guess what, it turns out, buncha people do!

Clare: Glorious. I grew up playing video games because my parents would let us, we were not allowed to own any, any Nintendo's, any computer games, we come from a pretty hippie family where we weren't, we were only allowed like a half an hour of TV a day, which was mostly *Degrassi*. We chose well. But we were allowed to rent a Nintendo for our birthdays, and because we had four kids and our parents worked really hard, they would forget which of us had rented a Nintendo for our birthday, so we were just talk them into believing that "yeah, it's totally my turn." So we got away with more. So it was, I have three older siblings and video games were from the start, like a way of us bonding and being together, especially with my brother because we didn't really talk much, but we could talk about video games. And when I was really little he would take me to this like, this place where you can pay money to go, to go play computer games. And he and his cool friend would let me come with them sometimes and they bought me a bag of chips once. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): I feel like I also remember like being interested in playing video games because my brother was playing them and wanting to play them with him because that's what he was doing, and he was my older brother. But that for me never translated into an actual ongoing desire to play them. Like, as soon as I sort of outgrew the desire to impress my bigger brother, I wasn't interested in them anymore. So what, what sort of carried them on being like, a part of your life?

Clare: Definitely started, yes as like a "me and Bran are going to be buds and I'm going to understand him in ways that my other sisters don't understand him," and so we could bond over like, *Goldeneye*. I was really bad at all of the things because I was six years younger than him, so much my dexterity was not really up to code. But I don't know. We got, we got a computer which was a big part of it, and so we could continue to, to sort of, we kept up with the technology a bit as we got older. But it all started at the, the original stuff was, was all family oriented and it just made me, it just was a way of creating connection that didn't have to be about, that didn't have to be obviously emotional. Like, we would just talk about the game. But it, it created such a weird subculture. Like, we created— it's like you do with any like, board game there would be like, house rules. We had very specific house rules for specific games which drove everyone else outside of our family crazy. We had like, a vocabulary. My sister actually I once wrote a sociology paper about the vocabulary that we created to like, define the weird different parts of our games. And then it became a way of like sneakily having emotional conversations with my brother. When I would sneak in some like, "so how, what do you think about basketball?"

Hannah (Host):	This is a classic Clare Mulcahy move, just PS. Like, just wait until she lures you into an activity and then it's like, "hey, so we're just walking in the River Valley. Maybe just quick, how are you feeling about your relationship with your dad?"
Clare:	[Laughs] I didn't really realized that was a pattern, but that's totally a pattern. Look we're just playing *Jenga*, but you have feelings about your family.
Hannah (Host):	[Laughs] Yeah, that's your M.O.
Clare:	Yeah, that was pretty much it. Like, I couldn't get Bran to talk to me about anything. But like, if he was distracted enough by the game then I could sneak in some like emotional bonding time. And I like worked on that for like, 20 years. That was my main mode of having a relationship with him. Yeah, because then I just got obsessive outside of family and I had, I had friends and boyfriends who played video games and I don't know, I just loved the obsessiveness about it. Like for me, so much in my brain as anxious all the time and thinking all the time and it's, it's a really hard job for me to turn that off. And video games are one of the only things that that do that.
Hannah (Host):	Yeah.
Clare:	And so just having that thing that is like, all engrossing was so— especially as I was going through like, you know, depression and anxiety and then family disease when I was a teenager, you know, having something that was, that escapist was so valuable.
Hannah (Host):	Yeah. So what do you think about video games as like more or differently immersive from like books or movies or TV or drinking? You know, our various other escape methods.
Clare:	I mean I think one of the downsides with video games is that you're staring at the screen the whole time, so like even at their most escapist, they often give me anxiety. So it's a weird, like double edged sword where I'm trying to escape the anxiety, but if I do it for too long then they give me increasing anxiety, and then I get like mad at the video game. It's really weird loop. And then I need more video games to calm me down. I get bored with more narrativey video games. I always skip the little like, cut scene where it shows you like, the hero finding a dog and befriending it. I just get bored.
Hannah (Host):	So it's the gameplay part, right? It's that like, actually sort of being able to interact with the thing. And so like, can you talk a little bit about kind of the kinds of video games you enjoy playing?
Clare:	I sure can, Hannah. I sure can.
Hannah (Host):	[Laughs] This is a trap.

Clare:	So happy. So growing up only video game. So the Mulcahys have one video game, which is *Mario Kart*, which we've been playing for 32, probably longer years.
Hannah (Host):	Can we pause for just a second here and say that when I moved back to Edmonton we started sort of semi frequent--
Clare:	Yeah.
Hannah (Host):	Or occasional might be the word for that, video game nights where we would gather and play *Mario Kart*. And the best thing about those nights would be the degree to which Clare would thoroughly trounce the rest of us like, just remorselessly and by miles. It's so funny.
Clare:	But recently, Trevor and Marcelle's roommate Jason is an excellent Mario Karter and he kicks my ass, and it's like, struck at my identity in a way I wasn't expecting. It's deeply upsetting and I have to pretend that it's not.
Hannah (Host):	Sorry. Actually we can't be friends anymore. I'm friends with Jason now.
Clare:	I know it's all I have to offer the world and he's taken it away from me.
Hannah (Host):	Okay. So there's *Mario*, that was your childhood game.
Clare:	I really, really, really like games where you have to like, farm. [Laughs] I think games where you have like, small accomplishments and at the same time like, an overarching thing that you're— so I often like games where you have to have like, a tower defense where you like build little armies to gather resources and build a little army. But I also really, really don't like games that are super violent because I'm queasy about that kind of stuff. So it's a weird like, I like army stuff but it has to be like pixelated and like, gentle sweet army. Murder people in a gentle cartoony way. Yes. So now I play by myself. I play mostly computer games, as opposed to games on the TV for some reason. I think it feels more immersive to have the computer like, there's something about the proximity of it that I really like the like, it's right here. I am in the computer. And then I like activity like, I can play with other folks games.
Hannah (Host):	Like what kinds of games can you play with other folks?
Clare:	Aha! Well as you know, Trevor and I play various *Marios* together, which Hannah has also played with us.
Hannah (Host):	My favorite thing to do is they have this setup, or Trevor has this setup, where there's like, a screen that you can have, like two people can be playing with the actual controllers and then a third person gets the Wii U. And the third person can be playing with this little screen and isn't a player, but just helps the other players, and I really liked that because I find the stakes too high when I am one

of the players, because if I die the other player dies. But I can like, help. Like, I'll build you a little platform. I can do that. I can help.

Clare: Hannah's very good at helping. She does a real good job.

Hannah (Host):   So I thought you meant like games that you can play on the internet with other people, which always sounds really terrifying to me.

Clare: Traditionally I do not like games with strangers. It makes me very anxious. Yeah. Even low key games, I don't like playing with strangers. I like playing against a computer or I like playing with my buddies. Yeah. I've never really like, used video games to reach out to other people in the world, because I think as an introvert I'm pretty much always looking to receive from the world. So the idea of like making small talk with someone on the computer is just my nightmare.

Hannah (Host):   Which also suggests that like you found a way for games to be a really important part of your life without actually needing to venture into like, the super misogynist world of gamers, as well.

Clare: Yeah. Yeah. That's definitely part of the advantage of, of not playing with other people that like, yeah, like even, even going on forums or things like that. Like sometimes I'll, I'll look stuff up or you know, look for a YouTube video of how to do this, this sick move that I want to do.

Hannah (Host):   How to farm the most turnips in one day.

Clare: Yes. Mostly that is the sick move that I am trying, and I have done it. But yeah. And then you get into like, even you just dip your toe into that whole world and like, the comments, or like the way that they talk about the, and it's so upsetting and just taints the whole thing. And yeah, so I've been, I do feel very lucky, you know, I do a lot of research into the shitty, racist, misogynist culture of gaming, but I do feel very lucky that I can like, for the most part, excise that part of, of the world for me. Yeah. Like sometimes you're supposed to make friends with people in order to progress the game and then I just quit the game.

Hannah (Host):   [Laughs] I know, right? Like, "hey game, you're not my mom, don't tell me to make friends."

Clare: [Laughs] I'm doing fine. I have lots of friends. I have like 10 friends, but [laughs].

Hannah (Host):   So there's a really interesting difference, I think, between like forming community to play the game that you want to play and what you do, which is trying to get your friends to play the game you were already playing because you want to share it with them. So could you talk a little bit about, you also like drawing your friends into playing the same games as you?

Clare: Oh my God, it fills me with such joy. All I want in the world is for my partner to play video games with me, and he does not like video games, and it makes me sad every day. And there was one time when I came home and he was playing *Mario: Yoshi's Island* without me and I thought, it was like he had cheated on me.

Hannah (Host):   [Laughs]

Clare: So upsetting. Yeah, I mean, I think for me, part of the reason why video games are such a good part of my, my friend life is like, I struggle with the initial parts of friendships. Like I think I'm really good at really close friendships and, and the like early "let's go on a coffee date together" stuff really stresses me out. So having an activity built in is always super handy for me, and especially because I have a lot of anxiety about being rejected by people that I want to be friends with. So I think using video games to become friends with people is like a, "it's cool, dude. Like, I'm not trying to be your friend, we're just playing video games. I don't even care about friendship. We're just two bros."

Hannah (Host):   Just two bros hanging out, playing some games. I also, that's interesting because, so, so some background context: we've, we have sort of sideways referred a number of times to a game called *Stardew Valley*, that I believe in our circle of friends you were the first one to start playing, and then you got like me and Kaarina and Derek at least into it, if not a wider circle of people. And so like that's, you know, that's not sitting down and playing a game together. That's getting other people to go and play the same game as you so that you can talk to them about it. So is that about sort of having shared reference points that sort of open up new kinds of engagement with your friends?

Clare: Yeah, I mean I think one of the things that grad school, or not even, I don't even know if that it's grad school, but my personality and part of the reason why I went to grad school is that like, one of my favorite things in the world is sharing cultural things that you love and, and talking about them and breaking them down. And especially for me, because I got kind of burnt out on academia being critical and cynical about everything, I really love talking about the things that make us really happy and like, why does that make us really happy? And so that's something that I always look for with the things that I really love. And sometimes it's hard to find that, you know, like I, I'm a rewatcher of things. So like, it's hard to find someone who's watching this like *Buffy* episode from like 10 years ago. But videos games are nice because they're like, mostly the stuff that I'm playing is contemporary, so it's easier to lure people in my pop culture trap.

Hannah (Host):   [Laughs]

Clare: And it's just, yeah. So it's just so much fun to be able to have that little like video game, book club, you know?

Hannah (Host):	I mean, that's what got me, *Stardew Valley* is the first video game that I have played with any intensity or regularity since I was like maybe, 12 or 13. And the thing that lured me into it was not like, you had independently told me that it was great and I should play it. But the thing that lured me into it was you and Dara and Kaarina on Facebook talking to each other and sharing screen caps and talking about different characters and watching you develop this, this conversation and relationship around these like, shared reference points. I was like, "I wanna, I wanna do, I wanna know who those people, I wanna farm a turnip." And so I did start playing, and then not only was it like incredibly satisfying to, to be able to talk to all of my friends about this game, but it's also the game itself was like, as you suggested earlier, like so good for my brain. Like I started playing at during a period of really intense and almost unmanageable anxiety. And it's such a simple, like the game mechanics are so simple, and it's just a series of achievable routine tasks that just is like, oh my God. It's so soothing to the over anxious brain.
Clare:	Yeah, for me, the like the sweet spot for video games is always that combination of like small, achievable tasks that make me feel like a good girl and a little bit of challenge that make me feel like, "but I'm working hard for my small achievable tasks." Because like, as we've talked about before, you know, academic life is filled with non-achievable tasks with projects that go on for like five years, with projects that never got off the ground with, you know, funding obstacles. And for me as someone who's a bit of a perfectionist, that's, that's super, super hard. So, so having video games during my PhD was so essential because I just felt like my thesis was never going to end and I wasn't good at anything anymore. And, I know.
Hannah (Host):	We were talking last night about how thesis fucks with your brain so intensely and then you get out of it and you're like, "oh that was fine. That was actually fine." But when you're inside of it, you're like, "this will never end and also, I am garbage."
Clare:	Mine went longer than other people. So there was like a lot of years of that feeling. So having this thing where it was like, "Oh man, I did that turnip so good. I'm planted that turnip. And then I watered it. And then the turnip just appeared the next day." So reliable and like and you get a like very objective reward for doing a good job. And just like, it's still important, but at that time in my life it was really, really important to me.
Hannah (Host):	Can we talk a little bit about the sort of like, hierarchy of like legitimate gaming versus illegitimate gaming? I'm about some sort of feminist scholarship, a number of games scholars have done about how women actually play video games more than men, but the games that we tend to play are like, like women play a lot of iOS games, a lot of app based games, a lot of like small sort of non-narrative games. Whereas men are more significantly more likely to play the, what's the name for those like, really?
Clare:	First person shooter?

Hannah (Host):	Yeah, like first person shooters or like you know, super immersed, like the really sort of expensive mega industry video games that are making an absolute fortune. And so the tendency to think about one kind of video game is like, the real kind and the other is sort of the not real kind. And like, the not real kind, in scare quotes, are the only ones I ever enjoyed personally.
Clare:	Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think it's like, for me it's interesting because I definitely went from trying to play the real kind, like the playing, my brother and I would play a Goldeneye, which is a first person shooter and then we would play *Doom* which is a really shitty early computer game.
Hannah (Host):	I tried to play *Doom* once and I kept screaming and dropping the controller.
Clare:	The visuals are so bad, but I think it's also like a first person shooter, if I remember. Yeah. Yeah. And then I played *Warcraft*. And *Warcraft* I think I loved because it was like a gateway drug. It was like I liked Warcraft before other people liked *Warcraft*. I did not play *World of Warcraft*. I played *Warcraft 1* and *2*. Thank you very much. Which is like, you know, there's an army and you have to carry a quest, but there's also a lot of like farming and like, mining which really is super up my alley. So it's like, you know, those games are huge partly because of the violence factor, but it was also like, weirdly domestic. It's like, take care of your peon. Like, make sure that they are well fed and have somewhere to live. And I think that like, that totally opened up a world to me of like, look at all these other kinds of games that they're hard that don't just focus on like, and then you shoot the dude and the dude's brain explodes. But that's part of why I've never felt like a real gamer even though I've been playing video games my whole life. I would never call myself a gamer because I like, I feel like I don't, I play the most like, cartoony pixilated— I don't like puzzles. I don't like anything that tries my intellect too hard. Like, I do not want to be challenged mentally. I want to, at most, mash buttons and like achieve very, very obvious goals. And yeah, it definitely makes me feel like, you know, that I'm not a real gamer that I couldn't talk to like my male students or something. If they were talking about video games, I would be very reticent to, to chime in.
Hannah (Host):	Yeah, me too. Have you played this video game that's about a depressed cat?
Clare:	But have they? Because it's great.
Hannah (Host):	Tell us a little bit about the video game about a depressed cat.
Clare:	*A Night in the Woods*?
Hannah (Host):	Yeah.
Clare:	You haven't played it. Yeah, Kaarina, this is part of how Kaarina and I bonded over video games. By the way, Kaarina is the most fun person to talk to you about video games, and just makes me so happy that she, she likes talking to me

	about them. But yeah, so *A Night in the Woods* is this great narrative based video game that's all set as animals. Players are all animals, and you're a cat and you go home to your hometown and try to like reconnect with your high school friends who have sort of moved on and are frustrated with you for like bailing on them and like figure out what your parents are like as adults and like try [Laughs]
Hannah (Host):	Weeee!
Clare:	And one of the best parts is that their, you best friend is named Gregg with two g's. And he's a dog and he's super enthusiastic about everything, except he has a very dark backstory. And every time he's happy about something he waves his arms and this wiggly manner [Laughs]. And like, there's an overarching story where there's like, a mystery in the town that you need to understand. But like, going back to what we were talking about, about immersiveness, like some of the first person not shooters, some of the first person gentle soft narratives, non-shooters are the most immersive for, for me because it feels like there is this world that you are operating within, but that you also have this little like, sense of agency within that world. And part of what I like about video games is both like, the community, everyone can talk about it but also like we all have these weird little different experiences of it. So it's, it's, you have your own individual relationship to it as well. And so *Night in the Woods* just makes you navigate those kinds of relationships. You have to make decisions about like, are you going to reconnect with this friend or are you gonna like, run away from this crush that you had in high school? And I, I just loved it. I mean, it's like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, but it's really, it just feels so much more intimate because you're the person who's having to make all of these decisions. Yeah. I've just gotten into narrative games, so that's, that's new for me--
Hannah (Host):	Okay.
Clare:	--because sometimes I get bored.
Hannah (Host):	Yeah. I can see that. Especially when you are like a professional reader and teacher of narrative, like that's your day job. And like, I often will come home at the end of the day I'm want to read a book, but also often do not. I'm like, tired of narrative.
Clare:	Yeah. Yeah. Like sometimes, like I was playing this game that's very well reviewed at called *Kentucky Roots Zero*, which is this very amorphous like, surrealist. Like you go to try to make a delivery and you go find this like, house that doesn't exist on the map and it's, there's like a television that's flickering on and off. It's like very, you have to do a lot of interpretive work. And it's so cool, but I was like, "I can't do it. I do this all day." And sometimes, I mean sometimes my favorite thing about video games is that like, I just have to mash a button, I don't need to think about anything because I think about things all day. My brain never stops thinking about things.

Hannah (Host):	Clare and I have had a couple of very satisfying afternoons, or evenings, or entire days playing, which *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, which was like a touch point high school like, or like pre-high school game for me. And we'll just take turns playing while the other person like, has a website open that's like, "now you go to this place." And it's just so like, even that level of like, figure out where you're supposed to go next is like, listen, ain't nobody got time for this. I'm going to use this play through guide and we're just gonna take turns trying to hit a spider with an arrow. And it's very satisfying and very soothing, except that I make Clare play all of the scary parts because I get too scared.
Clare:	I know. I was never that person. Growing up, those were my siblings. I know I've got to be a big girl. But yeah, like I love, I mean the collaborative aspect of that kind of play through is so much fun for me because I don't, I don't do a lot of collaborative work. Like, you know, most of my teaching is, is solo, most of my research is solo. I'm trying to have hobbies now that compliment that, because otherwise it can feel really isolating. And I just, yeah, that feeling of like, "we're in this together and it's scary right now, but it's gonna be okay because we're going to get through it together," is, it's just so wonderful. And I just feel like that, I don't know, that translates, that does something to the friendship in a certain way. Like if you're, if you're able to feel like we killed that pixelated spider together, man.
Hannah (Host):	[Laughs] Man, we've been through the war together. The video war.
Clare:	Like, Trevor and I totally became friends because I wanted to be friends with him, but he is a big weirdo, and so I didn't know how to be friends with him, and so I just made him play Nintendo with me. And like our--
Hannah (Host):	He's your new brother.
Clare:	[Laughs] He's my, he is my new brother. Derek was my Nintendo brother, but he's in Calgary.
Hannah (Host):	Hear that, Derek? You're dead to her.
Clare:	[Laughs] You want to be my brother, you got to stay here and play. Nintendo with me, otherwise the spot's going to get taken. There's a lot of people look into play Nintendo with this girl.
Hannah (Host):	Okay, so *Mario Kart*. Other *Marios*, the occasional old timey *Zelda*, what are some other games that you have? Maybe recommendations, maybe, maybe games that if there are other people who are listening, who like have never thought of themselves as somebody who would enjoy a video game and are not interested in investing in a console but can download Steam. *Stardew Valley*'s a good starting point, *A Night in the Woods* we have talked about, which is on my "to play" list. Oh, I'm also gonna, while Clare opens up Steam, I am also gonna put in a plug here for a like, play on your phone, iOS game that I downloaded

during a recent trip called *You Must Build a Boat*. Which, I downloaded it because it has the best name of any game ever: *You Must Build a Boat*. And it's a great, it's like a match three game, but with a little, sort of, pixelated dungeon runner interface built into it. And so like, you defeat enemies and collect items but via matching things in a very sort of *Candy Crush*-esque interface, but then as you proceed your boat gets bigger because you got to build a boat. And it was satisfying for a lot of reasons, including that it had an end which those games usually don't, but like at some point you have completed the building of your boat. And then you did it, you built a boat.

Clare: You must build a boat and you build a boat. One of the games that I've been playing recently is called *Broken Age*, which Derrick recommended to me. He's actually teaching it in one of his classes. And it is two split narratives, one boy and one girl and they're in two different worlds, and you can switch back and forth between who you want to play. And it's, it's really wonderful in the way that it subverts expectations about what's female characters' roles should be in video games, because the girl character starts off being a like, very damsel in distress. Like, she is about to be sacrificed to this monster and ended up with a bunch of other women who are all sort of dressed up for this monster, and then as soon as you start playing her, she like, she makes her own escape. Like, she figures out her own way out of it. And I was expecting the boy character to like, swoop in and save her, but that never happens. Like, she's just on her own and figures her shit out. And, in fact, he winds up being like the one who needs to be taken care of more. And it's just, it's interesting because at the beginning you can choose which of the characters you want to play as, because eventually their storylines intersect and so it sort of informs what you know about their intersecting storylines. So it's interesting to think about, you know, why would you choose the girl? Why would you choose the boy? Like, is there something attractive because the boy's, this, you know, seeming adventure, he's out in space. He's, he's going out there doing dangerous things, and so like if you choose him right off, what does that mean about you? And the game itself sort of unsettles your assumptions about who he is. And then ditto the woman. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host):   I like a game that begins with that laugh.

Clare: It is not feminist. *Kingdom Rush Frontiers* and all you do— it's so satisfying. You're just on a horse. Sorry.

Hannah (Host):   No [laughs]. No, that was an excited face, and then you said, "you're on a horse." And I was like, "What? Yes!" Best part of *Ocarina of Time*.

Clare: Yeah. Hannah was, didn't want to do most of the like, killing the bosses in *Ocarina of Time*. And it was going so slow, our progress was going so slowly that I was like, "all right, I'm going to get you the horse. And then you can come over and you're going to play with the horse." And then that's what we did.

Hannah (Host):   Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Clare went and fetched the horse for me so that I could come over and just ride the horse around.

Clare: Always doing the real work. Always killing scary monsters.

Hannah (Host):   You didn't finish. You ride a horse.

Clare: Sorry. It's like a pixelated 2D. You're just going back and forth on the screen. And all you do is ride a horse around and try to upgrade your little army at the center. There are people wandering around in the woods that you can come collect, and they will eventually come back with you and become, you know, archers or builders. And every night there is bad guys that come and attack you, and every day is time to build and prepare. But everything that you need is in the woods and it's very hard to get to, so you have to take risks about like how far out am I going to try to go before that turns to night and the bad guys get me and I'm too far away from my fort to be protected. But the further you go, the more goodies you get. And it's very, very, very hard and I lost a million times and it's just so satisfying and then I won. So I recommend that you win.

Hannah (Host):   [Laughs] Those winning eyes. Win.

Clare: Yeah. Those are the two that I've been playing mostly. I mean, I love iOS games. *Plants Versus Zombies* is a big one for me that I have played multiple times. It's super fun. It's super addictive. But it's less like, I find with some iOS games, it just turns into the anxiety meter for me, and that's definitely *Plants Versus Zombies*.

Hannah (Host):   Yeah. Yeah. It's a tricky line for me with mental health and an iOS games that like, like I downloaded *You Must Build a Boat* for a day that I was traveling and like played it that day and then played it another day, and then quickly notice it shifting from like, this is a really fun and soothing thing to do in the middle of a stressful travel day to, this is now contributing to my anxiety because I can't stop thinking about it. And so that's like, a nice thing for me about iOS games, and even about Steam games, because they're cheap so I don't feel bad about downloading it and then being like, "deleted. I'm deleting you for now."

Clare: Yeah, I mean I think one of the obstacles for women gamers is to feel like it's okay to spend time and money on this like, nonsense shit. Like when I was early in my relationship with my partner, I was visiting him in Calgary and he left for work in the morning and I was playing a video game, and then he came back at night and I was playing video games in the same spot. And I was so embarrassed and he even to this day I'll like turn off the video game when I see him in the door and--

Hannah (Host):   Pick up your knitting.

Clare: Exactly, and put my apron on. And like, I have a look when I've been playing a lot of video games, which is like a glassy eyed, " haven't eaten enough today" look, so it's evident. But yeah, I mean I'm, I'm a huge proponent of like, self care and taking time for breaks. And even for me, it's still like, a lot of the time I feel like I need someone's permission, or like I need to apologize to someone, I don't know who. The video game priest I need to confess my sins to.

Hannah (Host): It's really interesting to me to think of like, just as you were saying, like a barrier for women is the sense that we're wasting our time. When I think of the hobbies that most of the high achieving women I know have, they're productive hobbies. Like when I'm not doing this thing I like, run competitively, or knit, or like do something that has an obvious— like my hobby is I sing in competitive barbershop choruses.

Clare: Yes, and you win international competitions, just a real casual hobby. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Yeah, that commitment to do something that is a total, on the face of it, waste of time, which is like, I dunno, maybe we're insidiously socialized out of being allowed to do that. What do you think? [Laughs]

Clare: [Laughs] I think that cackle says it all. Yeah. Like, I think I grew up in a household where reading was the main hobby, and that was there like, the respectable hobby, and that obviously that was something I loved. But I think sort of with this new back to domesticity movement like that, that it's hip to knit or can or whatever, and I'm also totally doing that. [Laughs] So I am in that. But I think that that puts even more sort of pressure on women to have their hobbies be like something that's gonna, like keep us warm through the winter. And like being middle class and living in a city, there's so many opportunities to do those productive hobbies that you're talking about. You know, I've known folks who silkscreen or who, you know, do pottery or whatever. And so I, I find it really hard to just be okay with sitting. And my partner Todd has pointed out that when I have a day where I just play video games for like three hours, that I often feel like I have to overcompensate. I'll spend the rest of the day like I'm going to clean the fuck out of this house this house. I'm still a good person. I'm still a good person. And to just be like, this is an okay thing that I did. I don't have to like, make up for it in any way is super, super hard. and I think yeah, I mean I think academia is part of the problem there. I think the— and I mean, capitalism. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Yeah, a really interesting thing that some listeners have pointed out to me is like, a lot of the people on this podcast are academics because that's what I've been doing for the past decade plus of my life, and so that's who I know and then people will say like, "oh, that thing that you noted as being part of academia, I work in this entirely other industry and it is absolutely the same." That's like, "oh, a lot of. I think what we think is academia is actually capitalism."

Clare: Yeah, that's probably true. [Laughs] But I will say that one of the things that I've noticed about— because I have started working at NAIT, which is a polytechnic

in Edmonton for the last year and a half and I'm full time there now. And one of the interesting things about that is that it does treat your job like your job. Like, everyone has their other stuff, you know, they have their hiking or they're going away for the weekend or whatever, and it really normalizes hobbies in a way that I, I never felt in my time— I mean, partly maybe that's because I was a grad student and not a prof. You could speak to that more than--

Hannah (Host):   Yeah. Oh I, I mean, I once had a professor tell me that hobbies are a sign of weakness of mine. [Laughs] Yeah. Yeah. And like definitely have had so many faculty sort of proudly say to me that like, they haven't not worked a day in a decade, that they work on every vacation and on every holiday and never stop working. And it's, it's a point of pride for people to be like, "oh, I don't have a hobby because I work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year." And it's like, well, you are accordingly humorless. [Laughs]

Clare: And super boring. I don't want to talk to you.

Hannah (Host):   You can't talk to me about a fucking thing except your research. Like, I need you to tell me about a video game, is the thing.

Clare: And I imagine that one of the things that intersects with other fields is like, the feeling of being precariously employed. And especially as women, you know, I still have anxiety about like if I don't do a good enough job, someone's going to fire me because I'm a woman, and if I'm not really, really nice forever, then eventually someone's going to punish me for it. But yeah. But I think people who are underemployed and who are extra anxious about that because they're marginalized, that that's a position where it's especially hard to claim any space to do, you know, like, farm for three hours. Like not literally farm.

Clare: Let's be clear.

Hannah (Host):   Fake farm. Yeah. I mean it's hard. It's hard in the midst of precarity. It's hard in the midst of a non-procarity but like, super high expectations about your productivity and also in the Venn Diagram where those things overlap. Like it is, it is hard to justify non-productive hobbies. It's hard to justify the wasting of time. And I've noticed that we tend justify or that I hear a lot of a justification of have non-productive hobbies and have naps and have days off and of self care alone lines of it will make you more productive in the long run, which is like, "but what if it doesn't? What if this, this playing, this game doesn't achieve anything and won't make me more productive and will in no way improve the world. But it's just fun for me. Like is that forbidden for me?"

Clare: Yeah, for me, the year after my PhD was about figuring out what I want my life to be about, particularly because I have family illness. And I'm from a privileged position where I can say something like, I don't want it to be all about work. You know, it's nice. It's a lot easier to say that when you have a full time job that has a nice salary. But at the same time, it kind of feels radical to say that like, I want

it to be about stupid shit that like that is in no way contributing to like, society. Like, I want to talk to my friends about like who are they going to propose to in *Stardew Valley* and maybe are they going to propose to everyone? And did they see that cut scene yet where they get to make out with that pixilated girl? Like those are, I have so much more interested in a world where that is the primary conversation than just work shit. It's so much more interesting to me.

Hannah (Host):   I just want to go play *Stardew Valley* now so badly. Okay. I have one last thing that I want to talk about with you and that's only because I'm so desperate to have a conversation about this, which is a video series on YouTube called *Monster Factory*. And here's how I want to frame this.

Clare: We would like to talk about on the record.

Hannah (Host):   I mean just like it's important to get this on the record. Okay. So a major touch point of Clare and my friendship is our mutual deep obsession with all things McElroy, which is a trio of brothers from Huntington, West Virginia, who started a podcast called *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*, like a while ago now. And now have a whole media empire, the vast majority of which we both consume and then very frequently text each other to be like, "how do you think Travis is doing? Do you think he feels worried about taking over the new storyline in the *Adventure Zone*? I think he's going to be really good at it, but I'm afraid there's this narrative in the family that Griffin is the better storyteller and that that's really going to get inside Travis's head as he's trying to do this. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." [Laughs]

Clare: I just wanna give him a hug. He's gonna be great. Travis, you're gonna be great.

Hannah (Host):   Yeah. This is real. And we were talking the other day, or yesterday about how much the experience of watching these three total strangers become increasingly like politically conscious and compassionate and inclusive and all of the things that they do and make is like a major part of our faith in the world. It is just really important to have some models of— I mean, obviously most of my faith in the world comes from like radical and minoritized people doing incredible work, but there is something about having these models of like three white dudes who absolutely did not have to learn how to be this inclusive and did it anyway, that is like very good for my brain. And it's not a coincidence that the oldest and youngest, Justin and Griffin come out of the sort of video game journalism world, which is the gamer world that is full of super hateful, misogynist, racist shit. And they make this video series called *Monster Factory*, Justin and Griffin make it, where they start with a game that has a character creator and they fuck with the character creator to create things that it was never meant to create, which feels to me like a really radical intervention into the world of this particular kind of video games. Because they're playing these like— I feel like there's a, there's a term for those games isn't first person shooter, but first like, games that are made in that way. Like that particular sort of like high quality video that you play on a console, and I can't think of it and that's fine. But like, that world of gaming is dominated by white men, and to

have these guys playing these games in a way that subverts everything about how they're supposed to be played, particularly though not exclusively, at the level of bodies and what bodies should and should not look like, feels to me like I'm never going to play those games but this is a way into them for me. I don't know, do you have any thoughts about *Monster Factory*?

Clare: I have so many thoughts about *Monster Factory*. About our group of boys. Yeah, I mean, just while you were, I hadn't thought about it that way, but just while you were talking about it, I was thinking about like, one, one caveat on your description is that the point is that they're supposed to love the monster. And that is super interesting to me because these boys started out from a much more shamey place in their original— and again, a lot of their sense of humor would have played very well in the like white male dominated and video game world that they come from because it was a lot of like, fat shaming and like casual sexism and casual racism, but when they started *Monster Factory*, they were, you know, years into their development into the good boys that we know them to be. And so I think they very deliberately made it.

Hannah (Host):   Sorry, just Charlotte wants to be in the podcast.

Clare: You're famous.

Hannah (Host):   Got anything to say, Charlotte?

Clare: Yes. I think they have very deliberately made it so that the narrative has to be, "these are monsters, but we love them." So it's just interesting because there's often a shift somewhere where they create the most, you know, like horrifying figure that they can, but then, then the narrative always has to be, "but I love them." And it's such a wonderful place to come from because, because of that being the baseline, it totally changes the way that they talk about their creature. And so there's just so much like, weirdly body positivity and just affect that I don't think would be acceptable if they were different men or if they had done a different kind of video series. I think the point would be, "look at this disgusting thing and let's make fun of how disgusting it is," but they have taken that they've, they've chopped and screwed it.

Hannah (Host):   Yeah. Yeah. It's that, and it's something about that, like, such a significant part of mainstream gaming culture is about normalizing particular stories about gender and race and what bodies and subjects are like. And that plays out like— I'll, I'll link to this in the show notes— but there was this game that came out that randomized your race and gender, and so you, you couldn't choose and players got furious because being forced to play like, a woman or a person of color when they didn't want to outraged them. And so this act of using the like, sliders to create a character who like, in all ways subverts and challenges the normativity of desirable bodies and subject positions, but isn't about like, "Oh, look at this disgusting thing," but it's about like, "this is so beautiful. Look at this work of art we've made is so gorgeous." Have you watched the series that Griffin did where he's playing *World of Warcraft* without killing anybody or

doing any violence? It's, I mean it's just like, I'm not going to walk down that too far, but it's this similar subversion of the logic of the video game for the sake of opening up spaces in it to, to play differently, or to be differently in these worlds that feels considering what a role video games have played in like, contemporary misogynist and racist culture. And how much they are used by a certain segment of the population to sort of justify a vision of the world that excludes so many to have people doing this work with video games, that is about sort of pushing back against that and opening up these different kinds of spaces, feels really radical to me in a way that I wouldn't have anticipated. Like when I think of radicalism in games, I think of like, this amazing game that a trans woman made about trying to get ready and leave the house in the morning, and in the game you never get out of the house. And it's this way of sort of having you, as a player, embody the kinds of deep anxieties that keep trans women locked out of public spaces. Like, that's what radicalism against feels like me. And it's obviously not an either/or like there's lots and lots and lots of spaces to be radical, but there is something for me about these good boys and their good video series that, that have shifted my understanding of games even though I still don't play them.

Clare:	Well, I think another interesting thing that's happening for them is they're also, they're doing a mash up of like, the real video games and the, you know, the femmey, sissy games. Because they usually, I'm not sure if it's because this is where the character creator are, but they usually start with like a hardcore game, like a wrestling game or a superhero game or a first person shooter, but then they always turn the game into and emotional story about the characters narrative arc. Like, in one first person shooter, I'm forgetting, but they turned it all into a story about how this mother is trying to, trying to find her son.

Hannah (Host):	Oh my God. Is that the, that's the, the post-apocalyptic one, right? Oh fuck. The Final Pam--

Clare:	Yeah.

Hannah (Host):	--find her son, the tin can?

Clare:	And one of the things that I think is valuable of folks like the McElroys is that they occupy like, a liminal space between folks like us who they are like, trying to aim more toward and then, you know, folks like them, like a white, cis, heterosexual dudes. So in one of their games they tweeted to all of their followers to, to join the game, and they had named their character Daddy, Daddy Knives. And then, and then the rest of the video was people following Daddy Knives around and talking about how much they love Daddy Knives and how much Daddy Knives loved them. And it was just, it was such a fascinating thing because I'm sure lots of the folks who would have logged in were people who would know them from the gaming world and who would be, you know, I'm making assumptions, but some of whom would probably not think about games as a space to talk about how you love your father. But because they just have this like, both playful but very firm insistence on a certain way of

constructing narratives they, they kind of forced their listeners to take that step into that world. And I just think about like what did that do for those people to call to call this man their daddy and talk, mourn him when he died. And like, did that open anything up for them?

Hannah (Host):   Open up either some aspects of the relationship with their father or, or wink. Wink, indeed. [Laughs] Yeah. And I mean the common thread here across all of these sort of different conversations we've had about video games is like, this sort of radical potential for play, which is not something that I think women and people of color and minoritized folks, like not something that we're encouraged to spend a whole lot of time thinking about is like, how to have fun and how to play and how to have play and whimsy be part of our day to day lives. And that can be super fucking hard when your day to day life is a struggle. I, I keep thinking of this, I tweeted out one day, you know, "I just went for a walk in the sunshine and that was my self care for today. Like what are you doing for yourself?" And somebody responded and was like, "I'm a full time caretaker for sick and elderly parents. I don't get to go for a walk. Like, I don't get to do any of this. Like, don't assume that there's any forms of self care that are available to all of us." And I was like, yeah, fucking play can be such a luxury. And so finding ways to have that in your life, if it's playing *Candy Crush* for five minutes while you're standing at the bus stop or watching a silly 10 minute YouTube video, like just finding ways to embrace these things and bring them into your life, especially in like not oppressive forms, is just really, really exciting.

Clare: Yeah, I mean I do think video games are always hard for me in this way because they are, you know, they're not something that's available to everyone. They are expensive even if it's just to buy the technology. But I do think that the practice of indulging yourself and being— it sounds so cheesy— but being like open to joy. Because for, for me, I find it's really easy to, to just become obsessed with the really, hard scary things. And especially right now when the hard scary, things are getting harder and scarier. We're in a really rough time in the world, and is it okay to say I'm gonna play this game that might not even have very good politics, you know? It's hard to make that choice. But I mean, for me, part of what I figured out about video games is in terms of my own sustainability, and that I'm not doing anyone any good if I'm so burnt out that I am just a puddle of anxiety in the corner. And so yeah, so I don't think about it in terms of work, but I do think about it in terms of like the other work, the like being a good ally and being a good feminist and all of that kind of stuff, that, that having these moments of, of being nonproductive in that way can give you the energy you need to keep going. [Music: "High Rural Field Theme" from the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*]

Hannah (Host):   If you'd like more from Clare. Well that is too bad. She is a mystery. You can find show notes and all the previous episodes at secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And please don't forget to rate and review and recommend the podcast. The theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entIre album on

freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Clare's theme song was the "High Rural Field Theme" from the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. I'll be back next week, probably wearing like a jaunty cap that none of you can see. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]