

Stealth and a Transnational Politics of Location in Videogames

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Abstract

This article addresses Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's call for transnational feminist research that makes visible "the material conditions that structure women's lives in diverse locations" (17). The author argues that videogames can contribute to feminist scholarship by creating virtual spaces that simulate how a transnational politics of location plays out on women's bodies. This article provides a spatial analysis of three videogames, *République*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, and *Alien: Isolation*, to show how the games' procedures can persuade audiences to empathize with the surveillance and precarity of women's bodies in real-life transnational experiences. While the games focus on "stealth," the limitations provided by the gameplay simulate the different ways in which women's bodies must "sneak" around national identities and rules, thus showing the ways in which a transnational politics of location creates "contradictory positions. . . [for women who] inhibit unitary identities" (Grewal and Kaplan 7).

Keywords: videogames, transnationalism, feminist belonging, procedural rhetoric, empathy, spatial politics

With more than 65 million people displaced from their homes in 2016 due to war, poverty, environmental catastrophe, and political/personal threat (Edwards), many nations are grappling with how to harbor (or hide from) the ever-expanding population of nomadic subjects.¹ Though, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "[humans] have always been a traveling species" (215), many nation-states and institutions repress this historical human practice, reducing people to singularly located geographies or nationalities. In her work *Transnational America*, Inderpal Grewal writes that "any kind of single nationalism is a romantization of the past" (13), and her analyses of gendered artifacts and practices convincingly demonstrate how nationality is a shifting construct and gendered performance—one that is always imbued with contradictions that show how national boundaries, while materially constraining and impossible to ignore, are a fiction of "imagined communities" (Anderson).

As feminist scholarship like Grewal's indicates, women have had to confront the materiality of national borders and gender norms through dual/multiple citizenship practices, refugee petitions, and undocumented migrations, always attentive to the perils of late capitalism.² Therefore, transnational scholarship seeks to address what Arjun Appadurai calls the "model of

¹ Not counting the nomadic subjects who have always embraced their nomadic heritage.

² In this essay, I focus on women for clarity and concision, though this analysis could easily expand to include all feminized subjects including gender and sexual minorities. I acknowledge that this focus glosses over the messiness of the category of "women."

disjunctive flows” in globalized economies and communications, which include the flows of information, people, media, capital, goods, and ideas (21). In addition to these flows, transnational feminist scholarship must also address what Grewal calls the “scattered hegemonies” of neoliberal, global capitalism (Grewal and Kaplan 7). Attending to scattered hegemonies, or the various ideological and state forces of globalization, is messy and uncomfortable work, because it demands tolerance for ambiguity and flexibility in terms of the politics of location. While Adrienne Rich addresses how a politics of location grounds women in the specificity of their bodies, especially the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Rich could not have anticipated the ways in which globalization and late capitalism would complicate that idea. In this article, I analyze three videogames to demonstrate how transnational flows, including immigration, environmental devastation, and global capitalism, necessitate stealthing, for example, hiding, waiting, and passing undetected, as an update to the politics of location.

One of the reasons stealthing has become vital to a transnational politics of location is because, as the numbers of displaced people grow, many of the globe’s most economically privileged countries are promoting isolationist rhetoric and policies. The most obvious examples come from the U.K. and the United States, where Britain voted to withdraw from the European Union, that is, the Brexit vote, and U.S. politicians, including President Trump, have advocated for building a wall between U.S. and Mexico. In other words, while the population of displaced or nomadic people continues to rise, some governments are resorting to exclusionary practices and border policies.

To respond to this confluence of isolationism and escalation of displacement, this article addresses Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s call for transnational feminist research that makes visible “the material conditions that structure women’s lives in diverse locations. . . [and] the dynamics of these conditions” (17). To examine such conditions, a transnational feminist methodology provides a “counterhegemonic feminist reading” (3), which critiques the global-local and center-periphery models of the politics of location, a dominant idea that flows transnationally (12-13). Additionally, a transnational feminist analysis looks for the practices and locations that are often unseen but still challenge spatialized binaries—regardless of whether or not they are metaphorical, virtual, or material.

I argue that some videogames help reveal these unseen practices and places by creating virtual spaces where audiences engage in a simulation of how a transnational politics of location plays out on women’s bodies. Videogames, while providing a means of entertainment, also hold the potential to encourage empathetic responses to the lived realities of transnational belongings. More specifically, videogames provide procedural rhetoric—that is “symbol manipulation” or “the construction and interpretation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action” (Bogost 5)—that communicates how women are often positioned as agents to be constrained, labeled, and disciplined for nationalistic projects (Dingo 2012; Kaplan, Alarcón and Moallem 2007; Yuval-Davis 1997). While procedural rhetoric emerges from “inflexible systems that do not empathize” with players (Bogost 6), videogames allow for virtual experiences that can engender empathy in their audiences.

To prove this point about videogames encouraging empathy, this article provides a spatial analysis of three videogames, *République* (2016), *Alien: Isolation* (2014) and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017), in order to show how the games' procedures—the rules and processes of the software—can persuade audiences to empathize with the surveillance and precarity of women's bodies in real-life situations involving immigration, refugee petitions, and transnational capitalism.³ While the games are set in fictional futuristic, post-national settings where there are limited traces of previous national affiliations, the procedures of each game force players to change their strategies within the virtual gamespace, thus simulating the ways in which women must engage in stealth as a means of engaging a transnational politics of location. While all three games focus on “stealth” as a game procedure, the limitations provided by the gameplay simulate the different ways in which women's bodies must “sneak” past or around national gender norms and rules, thus showing the ways in which transnational gendered belonging creates “contradictory positions. . . [for women who] inhibit unitary identities” (Grewal and Kaplan 7) in the material world.

I use the concept of procedural rhetoric in this analysis because it is a different rhetorical situation from historical and classical understandings of rhetoric where there is a clear speaker/writer and audience. Instead, procedural rhetoric involves, not only the human agents of the player and developers but also “rule-based” processes run by a computer in order to negotiate “*expressive*” computation. As videogame scholar Ian Bogost explains:

I want to suggest that videogames have a unique persuasive power. . . , videogames can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change. . . this power is not equivalent to the *content* of videogames. . . rather, this power lies in the very way videogames mount claims through procedural rhetorics. (ix)

In other words, videogames make “claims” not only through the visual, narrative, audio, spatial cues of the game, or players' chosen actions, or the developer's intent, but also through the computer, players, and the developer, who co-construct an experience that creates a persuasive act.

Consequently, videogames are in the unique position to persuade people to have emotional experiences. Game scholars like Katherine Isbister have studied how games provoke—through “interesting choices” (2) (that is, actions with clear consequences), and “parasocial interactions” (7)—more complex emotional responses like empathy and compassion, emotions that “typically cannot be accessed with other media” (40-41). In other words, procedural rhetoric, “. . . allow[s] players to identify and engage in new ways, awakening different kinds of emotions that designers use not just for entertainment, but also for encouraging the deep awareness that travels alongside agency—a feeling of responsibility and of the complexity of relating to other beings” (42). The

³ Due to the journal's guidelines for submissions, I do not provide a game analysis of these games. For a more expansive analysis of these videogames, see my forthcoming book, *Not Playing Around: Feminist and Queer Rhetorics in Videogames* (working title).

following section presents case studies with varying degrees of success in building an affective or empathetic responses about the politics of location in a transnational era.

Stealth the Detention and Surveillance of the State in *République*

Released in five episodes between 2013 and 2016, *République* engages stealth gameplay in a dystopian setting that involves state-controlled surveillance and security. Stealth gameplay stands in opposition to the more familiar first-person shooter (FPS) or action-adventure gameplay of popular videogames, which focus on subduing and often killing opponents to achieve progress. Instead, stealth gameplay relies more on eluding enemies and achieving goals without detection. Therefore, stealth gameplay focuses more on *how* players strategically move through the virtual gamespace, deciding when to risk actions that might draw attention and when to hide and wait.

République builds upon this stealth gameplay tradition by presenting a female protagonist and eliminating the violence of the aforementioned FPS and action-adventure games. It is in this manner that *République* is one of the first videogames to engage in what I am calling “empathy-through-stealth” procedural rhetoric. In *République*, players cannot kill or permanently injure enemies, though they can incapacitate them with pepper spray or a taser. Instead, the majority of the game is about sneaking, hiding from, and eluding authorities, most often by crouching and using the gamespace strategically. Adding further innovation to the gameplay is the ability to hack digital technologies to aid in the stealth mechanics. With these gameplay mechanics, *République* conforms to the genre of stealth video games while providing some gameplay innovation.

Featuring a female protagonist who must stealthily navigate a detention center, *République* establishes the foundations for empathetic gameplay that maps onto issues of transnational feminisms. The game’s protagonist is a young woman named Hope, who is also known as 390-H by the authorities. In the opening cut scene,⁴ players see Hope’s face framed on a mobile phone screen. She pleads to players: “I don’t have much time. They want to erase me. They want to erase who I am. They’re coming.” With these few words, players learn that Hope is being surveilled and followed, and that she exists in a place where she is not allowed or threatened. Following this cinematic scene, players receive a level map of what appears to be a detention facility, framing Hope as an incarcerated subject of some dystopian governmental system.

Players learn some of Hope’s backstory during the gameplay, including that Hope is a cloned test subject, called a Pre-Cal (abbreviation for Pre-Calibration), in this detention center, and she is trying to escape by reaching “the Surface.” Instead of taking on the perspective or role of Hope, players take on the role of an unnamed hacker who can control the digital technology in the facility, overriding computers, alarms, and locked doors; manipulating security cameras to help Hope know when it is safe to move into a room; and analyzing data. Players also control Hope’s movements, deciding when to walk, run, crouch, and even pickpocket the guards, called the Prizrak, to gain knowledge and resources to help her escape.

⁴ A cutscene is a part of a video game that is not interactive, meaning that the content is scripted by the developers and players cannot alter it. These moments are also known as *cinematics*.

The game is set in a 1984-like world but with some “real world” contexts, specifically the experience of displacement, migration, and detention. The game is almost entirely set in a detention facility (“Metamorphosis”), and that setting establishes tacit connections between the gameworld and real-life spaces of an often-referenced transnational subject: the detained immigrant. Using an actual immigration detention center as a setting for the game would allow players to bring the specific historical and location-specific political framing of that contested space from their nationalities. By setting Hope in a fictional detention center, players can help a detainee sneak around a space that is all too “real” in the current geopolitical context without that space being over-determined by players’ national affiliation, which then allows the often unseen space of a detention center to become visible. Moreover, throughout the game, there are clear signs that Metamorphosis does not belong to any contemporary nation-state. The Prizrak, according to their ID cards (which players can access via pickpocketing), come from a variety of nationalities; the diversity of the Prizraks’ nationalities undermines any claims to a singular nation-state in the gameworld.

By fictionalizing the gameworld, the loaded and over-determined space of the detention center becomes a mystery to be discovered—a problem to be solved: how can players help Hope to the “Surface” without detection? Most of the gameplay is slow and requires patience, as players access the new rooms of Metamorphosis through hacking security cameras. When Hope is “caught” by the Prizrak, the interactivity of the game ends; the player can do nothing but watch Hope be led back to the nearest detaining cell. There is no limit to the number of times Hope can get caught. The game does not end when Hope is caught; rather players just begin again from the detaining cell, unlocking digital doors and scoping out spaces ahead of Hope’s movements. While no doubt the subject of the detained immigrant cannot escape an immigration center, the recursive practice of eluding authorities and repeated detention simulates some of the threats and experiences of undocumented immigrants.

Furthermore, this recursive gameplay forces, without alternative, a slow stealth mechanic that requires collaboration and trust between the “hacker” and Hope. By forcing one singular gameplay strategy, *République* compels players to engage in a different videogame mindset that is based on a non-traditional pace, that is, slow and patient, for a non-traditional goal, that is, escape. Furthermore, the fact that players take on the role of an unknown hacker to help Faith show that a stealth politics of location relies on communal belonging—not just individual resilience or endurance. I argue that this stealth mindset creates the conditions for a possible empathetic response for the experiences of detained subjects.

The analogy of Hope sneaking around Metamorphosis with undocumented immigrants avoiding detection, while obvious, is nevertheless historically relevant. The gameplay and gamespace correlate well with the detained (im)migrant and provide some political pedagogical impact for players, thus showing how some bodies experience recursive detention and stealthing with a transnational politics of location. However, being one of the first videogames to engage in empathy-through-stealth, *République* does not account for crucial gameplay procedures such as interesting choices and diverse parasocial interactions. In spite of these shortcomings, *République*

shows that videogames can provide virtual worlds that help players understand the world in which they inhabit, in this case, the world of immigration detention centers and state-sponsored immigration surveillance. The game, therefore, provides a baseline of how videogames, once an ephemeral and purely entertaining medium and often a project of violent masculinity, can engage in the politics of location for the gendered subject. As such, it is a founding text of a genre that includes later blockbuster games like *Horizon: Zero Dawn*.

Stealth and Attacking After the Environmental Apocalypse: *Horizon: Zero Dawn*

As noted in the previous section, not all stealth games omit the possibility of violence and aggression. In fact, some of the most lucrative games blend stealth with action-adventure mechanics such as shooting, free running, hand-to-hand combat, and tactical warfare such as traps and bombs. *Horizon: Zero Dawn (HZD)* falls into this blended genre of gameplay. *HZD* encompasses a much more expansive gameworld than *République*, requiring around 30 hours to complete. Unlike *République*, which requires linear gameplay, *HZD* is an “open world,” meaning that the gamespace is completely explorable at players’ discretion. Players can decide when to tackle specific missions, or they can explore the gamespace by hunting and collecting materials.

Briefly summarized, *HZD* presents a post-apocalyptic world that emerged after an environmental catastrophe caused by corporations’ unethical use of green technologies—originally invented to solve climate change—to develop weaponized AI. The AI take the form of hostile intelligent dinosaur-looking machines (called “the Machines”), which now roam the lands and threaten human survival. Like *République*, *HZD* uses elements from the real-world to build a gameworld. The virtual world is a re-presentation of the actual United States, specifically the western states of Colorado and Arizona, though the artifacts of contemporary civilization (e.g., buildings and monuments) are covered in plant-life or reduced to rubble. By using the historical threat of climate change as the cause of this apocalypse, as well as the geographical location of the western United States, the gameworld leverages actual political issues and geographical spaces to engage questions about the politics of location for the transnational subject in our historical moment.

HZD also features a female protagonist, Aloy, who becomes an excellent hunter of the Machines, thanks to the rigorous training she receives from her guardian, Rost. Firearms do not exist in this virtual world; instead she uses archery weapons, including trip lines, fire arrows, and explosive arrows. She is aided in her skills by a found digital technology from the lost civilization, a neurological device called a “Focus,” which allows her to digitally scan the environment to detect threats, find natural resources, and collect data about the fallen civilization. In Aloy’s world, digital technologies are forbidden because they are believed to have caused the environmental catastrophe, so she often must hide her Focus. Players can choose when and how Aloy uses her Focus to traverse space or defeat Machines or hostile humans.

In using the Focus, players can engage in stealth gameplay, hiding in tall grasses, setting traps, or sneaking past threats. While sometimes direct confrontation with hostiles is unavoidable, Aloy can often eliminate threats without detection. Players use environmental clues, juxtaposed

with digital technologies, to move from one location to another. However, using stealth mechanics exclusively can prove to be time consuming and, in many situations, an aggressive combat strategy helps players progress faster.

The impact of blending stealth with direct aggression creates two important outcomes in terms of the game's engagement with transnational themes and concepts. First, the innovative stealth gameplay demands that players consider how environmental factors and digital technologies can work together or function more efficiently on their own. The use of the Focus slows Aloy's actions, inhibiting her capacity to move quickly; however, it can allow her to perceive items in the environment that would otherwise be obscured. Therefore, players must judiciously decide when to interpret the landscape, flora, and fauna with the Focus and when to move about the natural environment unfettered. In the era of climate change, this cognitive and spatial strategy is an urgent one for people impacted by shifting weather patterns and environmental decline. While technologies, such as carbon scrubbing or weather tracking, could prove effective in avoiding displacement or harm, they are costly and time consuming. Sometimes, the best course of action is to read the readily available environmental cues, without technological intervention, in order to find a safer shelter.

Secondly, the combat mechanics speed up the missions and narrative of the game, thus allowing for more character development and side quests, including many more cutscenes, interesting choices, and parasocial interactions. The addition of these lengthy cutscenes allows the narrative content to directly address questions regarding a transnational politics of location. The game's narrative engages the problem of scattered hegemonies in that, within this post-apocalyptic society, humans have organized into tribes.⁵ Since birth, Aloy is an "outcast" from the Nora—a tribe known for their aversion to all technologies and metals and often called "savages" or "uncivilized" by the other tribes. Raised by Rost, another Nora outcast, she belongs to no territory or group of people. However, when the Nora are attacked by another tribe and threatened by the Machines, Aloy begins a quest to bring peace to the people who shunned her. As she encounters other tribes and people, they called her "Aloy of the Nora" because her clothing, body, and mannerisms correspond with those of the Nora. At one point, Aloy meets another character, Talanah Khane Padish, who also challenges tribal belongings and identity structures. Talanah remarks that Aloy should be called "Aloy Despite the Nora," noting that Aloy's strengths and skills are her own, emerging from her liminal tribal affiliation. This encounter, while brief, highlights that Aloy's nomadic subjectivity both constrains and aids her, and she can strategically cloak herself in the Nora's customs to pass as a Nora when necessary.

As Aloy's reputation increases in relation to her good deeds, she is invited to "stay" and make a home within different tribes, and players can choose Aloy's dialogue to respond to such requests, thus presenting players with "interesting choices" that are not present in games like

⁵ Since *HZD* uses real-world locations (i.e. Arizona and Colorado landmarks) for its post-apocalyptic setting, further analysis could show a (dis)connection between the imagined tribal societies of *HZD* and indigenous communities of the US West. However, this piece could not tackle such a nuanced analysis while presenting analyses of the other two games.

République. Her reputation earns her costumes that are affiliated with different tribes, so she can pass as a tribal member in those areas. Players can choose to equip these costumes at will, helping Aloy survive threats in those specific territories through a costume-based stealth.

Moreover, in *HZD*, many of the side quests require players to direct Aloy in aiding in quotidian, personal issues with different tribes people, building parasocial interactions that increase empathy during the gameplay. These side quests continually require that Aloy show care and concern for the minutiae of human relationships. The narrative content of these side missions engage an ethics of care on the behalf of players that can easily be connected to central themes within transnational feminist theory. While players can forgo these side quests and errands, to engage them means that players must care enough to engage in everyday errands like finding a family heirloom or searching for a sister's sibling who suffers from mental illness. In these side missions, the repeated narrative trope relates to the ethics of care, especially in relation to the gendered aspects of daily life that are often overlooked in games or deemed less than heroic.

The final cutscene reiterates this ethics of care. Aloy's final mission leads her to find her mother, who is long deceased. Upon finding her body, Aloy also finds a recording from her mother, recounting a story of her past and a lesson learned as a child. She expresses that she learned, as a child, that she "had to care. . . [because] being smart will count for nothing if you don't make the world better. You have to use your smarts to count for something, to serve life, not death." This final cutscene directly articulates the repeated narrative message in the side quests and other missions: to *care* is the only ethical work one can bring to the world. With this narrative content, along with the stealth mechanics (particularly the capacity to pass among different tribes), players are encouraged to care about not only Aloy's liminal politics of location but also the gendered experiences of other liminal subjects.

It is in this manner that *HZD* demonstrates how national or geographical belongings are flexible, contingent, and yet materially important for shaping a life. The game shows that a politics of location is about acts of belonging, not about residence and family lineage. Aloy eventually belongs to each of these tribes because she genuinely cares for and serves people in each territory. Furthermore, Aloy must use stealth strategies to earn trust from other people who live outside the tribal system. Players learn that survival is less about a static locatedness but more about who you choose to care for—and that caring for others allows people a way to sneak or stealth in and out of locations that would otherwise be hostile or unavailable. While the combat and action-adventure game mechanics could undermine the ethics of care and ethos of peace and harmony that the game tries to engage, Aloy's nomadic subjectivity nevertheless highlights how a transnational feminist belonging can stealthily evade the exclusionary practices upon which scattered hegemonies are founded.

Stealth Transnational Capitalism in *Alien: Isolation*

The final videogame in the case study builds upon the ideas and gameplay strategies from the previous two games. However, *Alien: Isolation* (*Isolation*) uses a virtual space to examine how transnational capitalism creates scattered hegemonies for the gendered subject—in this case Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen Ripley—the protagonist of the 1979 Ridley Scott classic, *Alien*,

famously portrayed by Sigourney Weaver. Amanda is an engineer and welder for a “megacorporation” called Weyland-Yutani. She is approached by a corporate executive, Samuels, about a mission to the Sevastapol space station, which is a “permanent freeport facility” owned by the Seegson Corporation, orbiting a giant gaseous planet. According to Samuels, another ship found the Nostromo’s flight recorder (the original ship from the film *Alien*), which may help Amanda gain some “closure” about her mother. Samuels explains that they are going to Sevastapol because the data recorder is “proprietary material” or IP for Weyland-Yutani. Upon arrival, an explosion separates the travelers, leaving Amanda alone to enter the station.

The rest of the game follows Amanda as she navigates the nearly abandoned space station. She encounters—and often collaborates with—androids and humans, but she also encounters the xenomorph (the alien) from the *Alien* film. The gameplay is about Amanda surviving these encounters and about finding out what happened to her mother and Sevastapol. The narrative of the game is not terribly compelling; most of the narrative content is derivative of the *Alien* film franchise. But like the film franchise, the game engages questions about the ethics of capitalistic goals—in this case, interstellar mining and exploration.

Ironically, this lack of narrative tension in the game is what allows the procedural rhetoric of transnational politics of location to be compelling and thick. Unlike *HZD*, *Isolation* relies heavily on ludic elements—the ways in which players engage the virtual gamespace to create a meaningful, nuanced, and compelling experience. The procedural rhetoric of stealth, or sneaking, is thereby framed as vital for nomadic subjects’ survival when navigating the scattered hegemonies produced by transnational corporate capitalism.

Isolation uses many of the traditional stealth mechanics found in *République* and *HZD*. For example, players guide Amanda, who almost always walks in a crouch position because running or walking upright makes noise, thus alerting enemies to Amanda’s location. The game also allows for the use of other mechanics to aid in the stealth gameplay, like crafting “noisemakers” to attract the xenomorph or other enemies, thereby allowing players/Amanda to move in the opposite direction.

To help players develop a stealth strategy, *Isolation* provides two mapping mechanics: level maps (that provide global spatial knowledge) and a “motion tracker” (to provide local spatial knowledge). As players move around a new level, the level map becomes more complete—showing spatial learning on the part of players/Amanda. These level maps help players understand Amanda’s relationship to the global spatial layout of Sevastapol. But this global mapping does not help players survive the immediate threats facing Amanda. To this end, the game provides players with a “Motion Tracker.” This device, which players can choose when and how to use, provides a 360-degree radar detection of localized movement. Knowing the local position of the xenomorph, androids, or other humans can help players decide how and when to move. However, if enemies are close, they can hear the beeping of the radar, so using the motion tracker can actually hinder Amanda’s progress. By providing both the local and global mapping/tracking mechanics, the game engages the dialectic between the problematic local/global binary that Grewal and Kaplan critique. Both mapping systems are incomplete in and of themselves. However, when engaged

simultaneously, players have a stronger spatial understanding, allowing for more successful stealthing.

Where the stealth game mechanic adds something radically different from other stealth games is that the Artificial Intelligence, or AI, of the xenomorph is unpredictable. Creative Assembly, the game developers, coded an engine where the xenomorph moves in unpredictable or new ways based on players' actions. When Amanda dies, the next time players respawn, the AI will not behave in exactly the same way. There's no way to learn or memorize the path of the AI because its behavior is contingent depending on players' spatial behavior, meaning that the AI reacts to the specific actions of a given player. Some reviewers found this AI mechanic to be brutal or tedious, requiring a lot of time on the part of players since Amanda will die over and over without making progress. The resultant procedural rhetoric of this AI mechanic means that players cannot "run" away or defeat the xenomorph. When Amanda is detected, she will die. There is no way to injure the xenomorph through aggression. Players continue confronting this immortal threat because game includes an official "end" where Amanda destroys the freeport facility and ejects herself into the vastness of space where she floats ambiguously between life and death. In essence, she destroys one space of interstellar capitalism, thus resigning her own existence to a slow death in a space suit or some kind of unlikely rescue.

Finally, making the gameplay even more tedious, complicated, and user-based, there is no autosave or "soft save" check points in the game. Instead, there are diegetic "save" mechanics, in the form of old emergency phones, which require players to install an access card—during which time Amanda can be killed or detected. This "manual" save mechanic compels players to evaluate the space and the level of risk they are willing to take. Do you risk going to the save spot and being detected, but saving your hard won progress? Or do you forge towards your goal?

I argue that the spatial design of the game, juxtaposed with the stealth mechanics—especially the game engine AI—produces a procedural rhetoric about the difficulties of transgressing or moving across boundaries in a transnational capitalistic world. In the case of *Isolation*, the "transnational" world is interstellar, but the space station is still a "freeport facility" in the language of the game. The stealthing mechanic is, on the surface, a way of hiding from the horror of the xenomorph. However, the spatial and gameplay analysis show that the xenomorph is not the "alien," or that which is threatened in this transnational location. The xenomorph can move without fear or any kind of defense. Conversely, humans aboard the station are the alien Other who must sneak around or risk annihilation.

In this virtual world, humans, like Amanda, exist under the orders of capitalist labor or interstellar capitalism, which reduces them to sneaking around and trying to survive. The mission for the Nostromo, in *Alien*, is to mine for resources, without concern for interstellar limits. In *Isolation*, the mission is to control intellectual property related to interstellar exploration. While the act of interstellar expansion is not irresponsible in and of itself, in the film series and the game, the human characters are all laborers who are in peril because of capitalism's inability to abide any limit.

The gamespace, therefore, presents the affective and challenging experience of navigating the scattered hegemonies of transnational capitalism. Through its level design and game mechanic, the game repeatedly highlights that players are constantly threatened with no way to overcome this threat. Instead, the best one can hope for is to sneak past in a tedious manner, e.g. hiding in lockers and vents or backtracking to less threatening spaces which forestall Amanda's progress. In other words, this virtual space expresses that humans have transgressed or gone beyond a limit some time ago, which the gameworld reflects in the condition of the broken down and abandoned space station. The game mechanics highlight the fact that the concept of linear "progress" is no longer helpful in orienting players in this perilous space. Such peril engenders constant disorienting and remapping since players cannot memorize the space and how the threat moves in it. Linking back to Isbister's work on videogames and emotion, the procedural rhetoric of *Isolation* is all about affect—the impact of horror, fear, and tension as players try to avoid a threat that they cannot defeat, nor ever fully elude because the AI engine keeps evolving as the game continues. The xenomorph, therefore, comes to represent the ever-shifting scattered hegemonies of transnational capitalism, forcing players to spend time in spaces that—in other games—players would run by without a moment's pause. Therefore, progress is slow, the threat is always near, and players' movements are rarely linear. *Isolation* provides a more pessimistic procedural rhetoric about a transnational politics of location, but regardless of this point of view, it captures the horror of stealthing scattered hegemonies of transnational capitalism.

Most of us, in the non-virtual world, are constantly stealthing transnational capitalism, figuring out our ways around the threat, which often push us into spaces that we rarely discuss but tolerate/endure nonetheless. Whether it is jumping the turnstile at the subway station or crossing national borders for more affordable medications, people—even in economically privileged nations—learn to navigate the structured logics of transnational capitalism, causing many of us to double back, to stand still, or to even hide to wait out potential threats or punishments. The procedural rhetoric of *Isolation* mounts the tedium and recursive nature of such movements.

Conclusion

These three videogames' stealth mechanics provide simulated experiences of a transnational politics of location thereby highlighting empathy-through-stealth. In *République*, players get to stealth around a detention facility, hacking digital technology to help a detainee escape, thereby foregrounding stealth as the *only* means of a transnational politics of location. In *HZD*, players are presented with narrative content related to flexible citizenship and transnational belonging, as well as an ecological critique of climate change and gendered responses to it. *HZD* focuses on how stealthing necessitates caring about quotidian dilemmas in order to build a network of solidarity, or what in game studies is called parasocial interactions. Finally, in *Isolation*, players cannot escape the threat of the xenomorph, thus stealthing is only possible with strategic local and global mapping, often used in tandem. Each of these games present virtual locations where national belongings are traces that both do and do not constrain the gameplay experience. Read together,

these games allow players to engage theoretical questions about how stealthing works (or does not work) in relation to avoiding the material consequences of transnational flows.

In making this argument, I do not mean to flatten all transnational stealthing into the same category. Indeed, there are significant differences between transnational stealthing, especially in terms of their consequences and level of threat. Instead, these videogames show how stealthing is an inherent component of a transnational politics of location—more and more situations call for stealth strategies as a way for women to survive the material consequences of transnational flows. Furthermore, these games are not free from faults and gaps in their procedural rhetoric. As noted earlier, *HZD* employs a type of violence that is all too prevalent in AAA videogames. Furthermore, these games all feature white and/or Anglo- or Euro-centric female protagonists. The phenomenon of systematically over-representing white playable characters is well documented in videogame scholarship (Williams et al). Since some of the most vulnerable transnational citizens tend to be racial minorities in the spaces they stealth, this is a significant flaw in these games' abilities to build empathy and understanding of a real-world transnational politics of location. The invisibility of the protagonists' whiteness, while not always relevant for the fictional context (e.g., *Isolation's* xenomorph), means that visible racial differences are not part of players' stealthing strategies.

Nonetheless, my overall argument is that games, such as *République*, *HZD*, and *Isolation*, show much promise in the evolution of videogames to present complicated feminist themes. While each game is hardly free from ideological or formal critique, they mount urgent simulated experiences that transcend filmic or literary representations of the transnational subject, creating the potential to engender positive emotional responses that encourage deep thinking, reflection, and care. Because they focus on single protagonists, these games facilitate an engendering of empathy for the social and individual aspects of a transnational politics of location rather than a recognition of institutional responsibilities for the transnational subject. In spite of this limitation, the games in this article demonstrate how videogames, often artifacts of empire and transnational capitalism, can be transformative. Isbister argues that “no other medium offers this kind of transformative power at the individual and social levels” (71), and I find that these three games prove her point. Moreover, they give audiences pause to think about the ways in which our politics of location—especially in globalized capitalism—demand that we sneak around borders and barriers, an all too timely concern for this historical moment.

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