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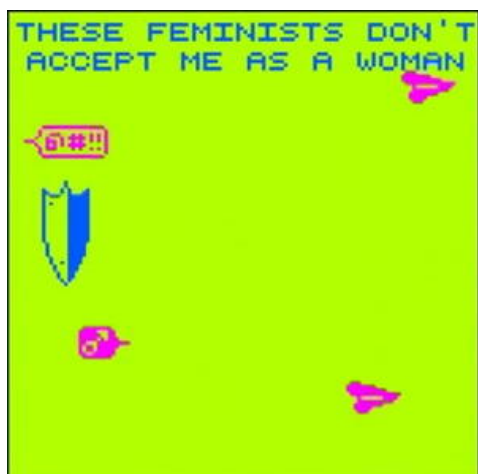Pape, T. (2021). The queer politics of stealth gameplay. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, *60*. https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Pape-StealthGameplay/index.html

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

In this scene in *dys4ia*, the queer individual is represented as a shield to render the necessity of protection against trans-exclusionary feminists.
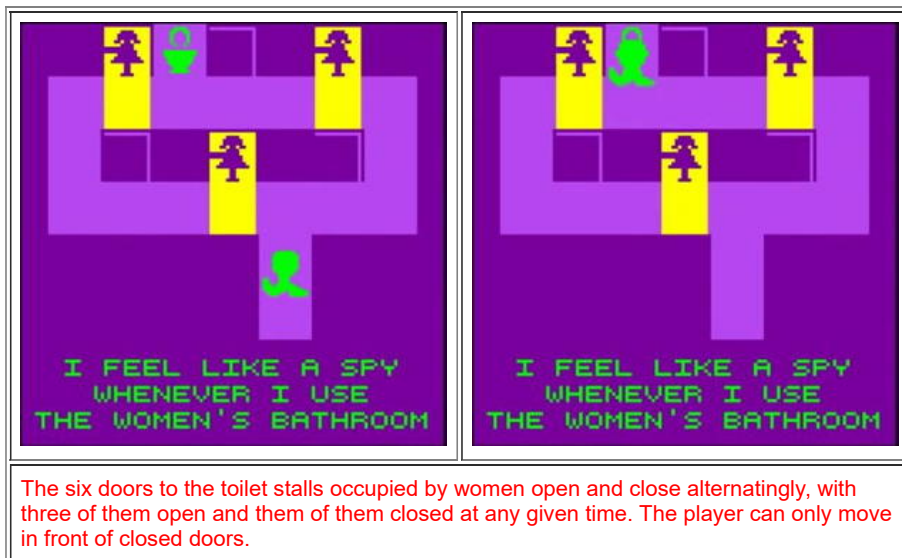
The queer politics of stealth gameplay

by Toni Pape

Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* is an "autobiographical game about [the developer's] experiences with hormone replacement" and gender dysphoria (*dys4ia*). The first of the game's short levels addresses "Gender Bullshit", including a number of issues ranging from the humiliation of shaving to transphobic feminism. The moment that opens this article concerns Anthropy's use of a public toilet for women. The graphics, reminiscent of the 8-bit era, provide an abstract depiction of a public toilet. The green (gender dysmorphic) creature that serves as the player's avatar is positioned toward the bottom of the playable area and is tasked to reach the green toilet bowl at the top of the screen. However, the way to the toilet bowl is blocked by other women who repeatedly open and close the doors to their stalls, also creating areas of (yellow) illumination that would force the avatar into uncomfortable visibility. For fear of disturbing the space's normative assumptions regarding gender presentation and the consequences they might have to face for visibly diverging from such gender norms, the green creature wants to stay under the radar, does not want to be perceived. The gameplay solution to this problem is to pass the stalls occupied by other women in the moment their doors are closed. By contrast, walking into the light leads to immediate failure.

This scene in *dys4ia* speaks to the experience of being misgendered.

This scene in *dys4ia* addresses the 'humiliating' experience of dealing with beard growth on a female-identified body.

This is stealth gameplay in a strict, albeit rudimentary form: The success of the mission is dependent on the avatar's simulated imperceptibility. Suspecting herself to be an unwelcome presence, Anthropy tries to make herself imperceptible. "I feel like a spy whenever I use the women's bathroom," she confides at the bottom of the screen, making the connection between living a non-normative gender and a surreptitious mode of political action. This connection is by no means incidental (Garber 1997, 234-266). In fact, the very expression "going stealth" is "used by many transgender-identified people to describe

nondisclosure of transgender status" (Beauchamp 2019, 34). In this particular instance, then, the basic stealth mechanic implemented in this segment of *dys4ia* articulates "a *tactic* for escaping state surveillance or persecution" or other, more immediate acts of violence that gender-nonconforming individuals regularly face (48, emphasis added). Thus, in order to aesthetically render tactical imperceptibility as a technique for mental and physical self-protection and survival, Anna Anthropy, an artist who is strongly committed to queer politics, relies on the gameplay mechanics of stealth video games to present her queer life experience. Queerness is, at least occasionally, stealthy.

The six doors to the toilet stalls occupied by women open and close alternatingly, with three of them open and them of them closed at any given time. The player can only move in front of closed doors.

This article tests the reverse hypothesis: If queerness is occasionally stealthy, can stealth gameplay, in turn, be considered queer? Starting from this question, the article will study the aesthetic experience of stealth gameplay in two of its subgenres, sneaking stealth and social stealth. After a brief consideration of gameplay and its potential for processual queering, the argument first addresses the game *Dishonored 2: Death of the Outsider* (Arkane 2017) to articulate how sneaking stealth enables a relational engagement toward queer survival. Subsequently, the analysis will turn to the social stealth of the *Hitman* series (IO Interactive 2016-2021) to argue that stealth participates in an environmental mode of power that, following the work of Brian Massumi, will be called *ontopower* (2015). In the final section, I will draw conclusions regarding the relevance of stealth gameplay to queer political practice more broadly, suggesting that the aesthetic experience of stealth gameplay creates an appetite for the formation of a disavowed, yet persistent undercommons whose political efficacy resides in the uncompromising transformation of a normative, oppressive order from within (Harney and Moten 2013).
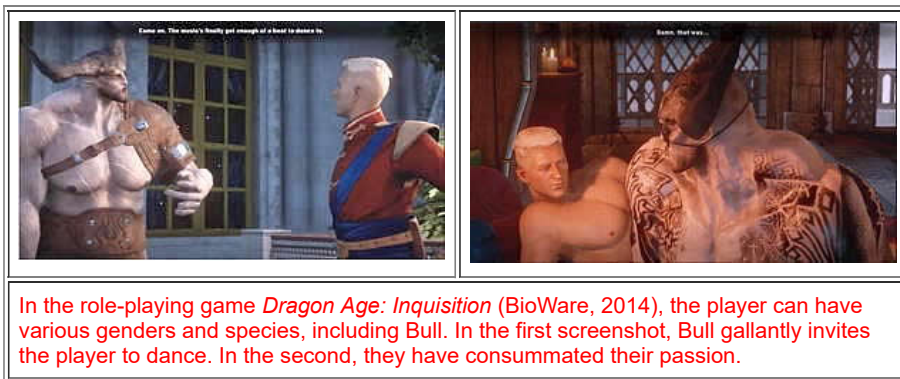
Queering gameplay

Queering is often associated with the resistance to and breaking of norms, what Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson call queer theory's "primary commitment to antinormativity" (2015: 1). In the case of video games then, a practice of queering would have to test and undermine the norms of gameplay itself. Besides the important question of queer or LGBTQ+ representation in videogames, this raises the questions of, first, how what one does in videogames is grounded in certain norms that order and give sense to player activity and, second, in what way these norms can be and have been challenged by players and developers. In key with this understanding, Edmond Chang defines what he calls *queergaming* as follows:

> "Queergaming engages different grammars of play, radical play, not grounded in normative ideologies like competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and

win states. […] How might we develop game play and end states that invite exploration, cooperation, complexity, meditation, ambival/ence, alternative spaces, even failure?" (Chang 2017, 19)

In the role-playing game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), the player can have various genders and species, including Bull. In the first screenshot, Bull gallantly invites the player to dance. In the second, they have consummated their passion.

DreamDaddy (GameGrumps, 2017) is dating simulator about gay dads. An example of queer representation in video games.

The romance between Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us: Part 2* is another example of queer representation in games. This romance was one reason why the game got 'review bombed' by users on platforms like Metacritic.

The challenge to "normative ideologies" or values surely plays an important role in queergaming or queer gameplay. To provide a brief sketch of such gameplay norms, let's consider shooting games.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Many shooting games cast conflict as the confrontation between a *(hyper)masculine hero*—which can be a generic soldier type or a fleshed-out character—and a swath of generic enemies with an infinite supply of back-up. Here, the hero is often a resolute, relatively independent agent ready to take decisive action. Conventionally, the player's task is to navigate intricate maps to find strategic advantages, such as a safe cover spot from which the enemy is vulnerable, so that the player can then decimate the enemy's ranks. This is often, and importantly, done by means of various *firearms*.

My interest here is less in the representation of guns itself and more in how firearms in shooting games organize and distribute in-game action across the gamespace. While close combat or "melee combat" and even some stealth options are integrated in many recent shooting games, the emphasis in armed combat is on *relatively distant targets* which, in turn, foregrounds the equipment's imagined prowess—and by extension the avatar's and the player's combat prowess. The more powerful one's weapons are, the more *damage* they can do. The higher the weapons' *range*, the better they can reach distant targets. Consequently, many first-person shooters are closely linked to conventional notions of *warfare as force-on-force combat* in a relatively open arena between at least two fronts whose strength and number are more or less known to one another. For instance, when playing a shooting game online, it is very important that the teams are more or less equally strong in numbers and experience. For this purpose, shooting games create *equality of chances* through matching algorithms. In this way, the gameplay mechanics suggest that warfare is grounded in a *symmetric distribution of power* between two or more combatting parties that are roughly equal in strength. The following analyses will show that many of these conventions are suspended in stealth gameplay.

But note that when Chang suggests that "queergaming engages different grammars of play," he does not so much advocate a straightforward resistance to normativity as a sidestepping in the sense Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes:

> "*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object" (2003, 8).

In other words, queer gameplay is not necessarily about a resistance to normative gameplay conventions, but a style of play that introduces and performatively affirms values that are bracketed by or subsumed under more normative values such as competition, exploitation, speed, etc. Queering, then, is not only or necessarily a moving-up-against and can also be a divergent repetition or distortion of a conventional gameplay mechanics. As the opening example of
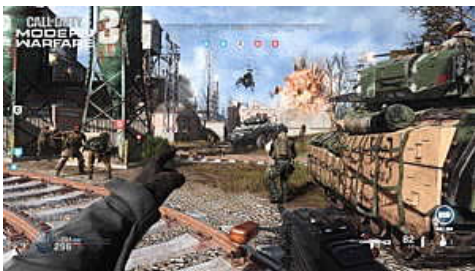
This promotional image for *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) gives a good impression of the multiplayer action in shooting games, illustrating some of the elements foregrounded in the text.
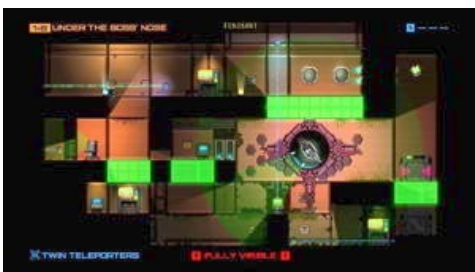
Stealth Inc. (Curve, contains 2011-15) presents the player with environmental puzzles. Here the little clone in the top left of the screen has to get to the door at the right of the screen, avoiding lasers and cameras. Many puzzles cover just one screen, which means the game consists of a series of self-contained challenges.

Volume (Mike Bithell Games, 2015) is a 3D stealth game. The player's avatar , the black stick figure in the middle has to reach the level's endpoint without being spotted by the guards. The main campaign consists of 100 levels or environmental stealth puzzles.

dys4ia indicates, stealth's sidestepping can be a moving past, alongside or with the qualities of 'enemy' movement for the purpose of evasion (Pape 2017, 45). Thus, the queer potential of stealth gameplay must also be associated with that play style's tendency to enact perceptual ecologies that allow the player to become imperceptible within a dominant, oppressive surveillance network by inflecting and rerouting its violent tendencies and operations. As a result, certain habits of dualistic thinking—including the opposition between normativity and anti-normative queerness—may need to be reconsidered.

In their linguistic discussion of the various senses of "queer," Mel Y. Chen foregrounds that the verbal use of queer—as in 'to queer' or 'queering'—"is a process comprising developments of relations along a time path" (2012, 75). This is crucially important in conjunction with Chang's definition because it allows for a slight shift in analytical focus away from the verb's transitive object, the 'something' to be queered, to the process of queering itself as it unfolds over time and how that process 'develops'—that is, unfolds, deforms, twists and shifts—the fields of relation it encounters. Therefore, the present account foregrounds the temporalities and relationality of stealth gameplay. This methodological lens complicates any understanding of stealth as a clear strategy of resistance, for instance to the surveillance of queer individuals and communities, or ultimately entirely complicit with, say, the military-entertainment complex which at least some stealth games belong to. In fact, this understanding of queering as fundamentally processual questions the productivity (not the possibility, however) of queer as a fixed positionality—identitarian, political or otherwise. The queer politics of stealth are a politics of process.

Sneaking stealth: queer survival in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*

Sneaking stealth can be meaningfully distinguished from other subgenres of stealth gameplay such as social stealth and what one might call puzzle stealth. In sneaking stealth, the player's task is to become-imperceptible by blending into the material and perceptual environment. This can be done by using secret passages, manipulating light sources and using shadows, distracting enemies or 'luring' them to places where they can no longer perceive the player character. One can also lure them toward the player character for a silent takedown (lethal or nonlethal, according to one's play style). Depending on the game, there may be other gameplay mechanics that enhance the player's sneaking opportunities.

Cover art of *Dishonored* (Bethesda, 2012).

Cover art of *Dishonored 2* (Bethesda, 2016).

Hitman Go (Square Enix Montreal, 2014) is a turn-based puzzle game that combines *Hitman*'s stealth gameplay with the mechanics of the Chinese strategy game Go.

Social stealth, in contrast, relies on becoming-imperceptible by means of disguises: If the player wants to infiltrate, say, a guarded estate, they might be able to gain access by donning the uniform of the gardening crew working at that estate. Thus, social stealth is about hiding in plain sight or *passing* as the following section will elaborate in detail. Finally, puzzle stealth provides puzzles whose rules articulate a symbolic concern for imperceptibility such as "don't touch the red laser" or "don't enter the (movable) camera's field of view." Some games in this subgenre, such as *Stealth, Inc.* (Curve, 2013), foreground dexterity and timing. Others like *Invisible, Inc.* (Klei Entertainment, 2015) and *Hitman Go* (Square Enix, 2014) are turn-based games that focus on strategy. I do not consider puzzle stealth in this article because their fairly strict rule systems oftentimes (but not always) require a more rationalist approach (instead of a strong relational engagement with a material environment) and thus also inhibit the processual queering of gameplay that can be observed in sneaking and social stealth.

Dishonored: Death of the Outsider (Bethesda, 2017) is the third instalment in the *Dishonored* series and belongs to the genre of sneaking stealth. Set in the steampunk-inspired Empire of the Isles, the series initially revolves around a battle for the throne. In the first instalment, empress Jessamine Caldwin is assassinated, her throne usurped by the Lord Regent, and the royal guard turned against anyone loyal to the late empress. As a result, the empress' royal protector —and playable character of *Dishonored*—Corvo Atano is arrested and their daughter Emily Caldwin, heiress to the throne, is kidnapped. Corvo Atano, controlled by the player, manages to escape and must now stealthily navigate a tight surveillance apparatus to vanquish the Lord Regent and instate Emily Caldwin as the rightful empress. The basic plot of *Dishonored 2* is rather similar, with Delilah Copperspoon serving as an alternative villain who usurps the throne of the now adult Emily Caldwin. One notable difference, both in terms of representation and gameplay, consists in the fact that the player can now choose between playing the game as Corvo Atano or Emily Caldwin herself. Their shared goal is to regain the throne and protect their monarchy. Initially, then, this is not a very queer project as Eli Dobromylskyj shows (2019).

Billie Lurk, the main character of *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider.*

In these two titles, Billie Lurk (Rosario Dawson)—a queer black woman—figures as a secondary (non-playable) character whose loyalties vary starkly due to her marginalized status.

> "Unlike Corvo, [whose] swordsmanship earned him the royal protector position, she has moved laterally, rather than up the social ladder: from starving orphan, to thief, to assassin—not for any noble end, but for basic survival" (Cole 2017).

A view of the fictional steam-punk city Karnaca, where much of *Dishonored 2* and *Death of the Outsider* are set.

Trying to escape abuse and sex work as a child, young Billie Lurk ultimately becomes an assassin, an occupation that soon makes her an outcast and pariah, a status she'll keep throughout the series. In *Dishonored 2,* she lives in hiding as Meagan Foster on her ship the Dreadful Whale before her identity is revealed to the player. During the day, Meagan Foster deals in contraband. At night, she dreams of her lost lover Deirdre. *Death of the Outsider* is the third and so far last game in the series. In this instalment, the player for the first time controls Billie in her quest to destroy the Outsider, the supernatural being that resides in the metaphysical dimension of the Void and is the source of magic in the world of *Dishonored*.

Billie Lurk's biography is important inasmuch it explains both her relative social invisibility as a marginalized, dispossessed individual and her hypervisibility as a criminal (for instance on "Wanted!" posters placarded around the game world). Hence, Billie Lurk resorts to stealth in order to actively and systematically "refuse the terms of visibility imposed on" her (Hartman 2020, 18). Stealth allows her to tactically occupy the spaces that elude surveillance and control, the interstices within her hostile surroundings, an outside that is immanent to the oppressive world she inhabits. Billie Lurk is in "refusal of what has been refused" (Harney and Moten 2013, 96), so much so that she intends to upend the very metaphysics of the world she inhabits by eliminating the Outsider.[2] She, too, must surreptitiously sneak through a world full of danger and achieve her goals by subterfuge rather than open confrontation. In this admittedly convoluted plot synopsis, one keyword for the following gameplay analysis is magic. Magic is crucial to Billie Lurk's queer project of survival by stealth.

In addition to this backstory, the character design for Billie Lurk/Meagan Foster further motivates and supports the queer gameplay of the series. In a number of ways, the character design in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* deviates from the gun-toting, hypermasculine heroes of many action games. As gaming journalist Riley MacLeod points out, this deviation is conventional in stealth games:

> "The bodies in stealth games are different. In most cases the biggest fantasy they embody is having astonishingly reliable knees; otherwise they tend to be smaller, 'weaker,' not necessarily good at fighting. […] Without the bombast of shooter bodies to draw your eyes to explosions, stealth bodies are often adorned with little nuances: Garrett's hands dance over the edges of paintings and the wheels of safes; *Mark of the Ninja*'s ninja swoops, dangles, slides, and crouches with luxurious elegance." (MacLeod 2015, n.p.)[3]

The Outsider, the sacrificial protector of the oppressive metaphysical order in the *Dishonored*'s steampunk world.
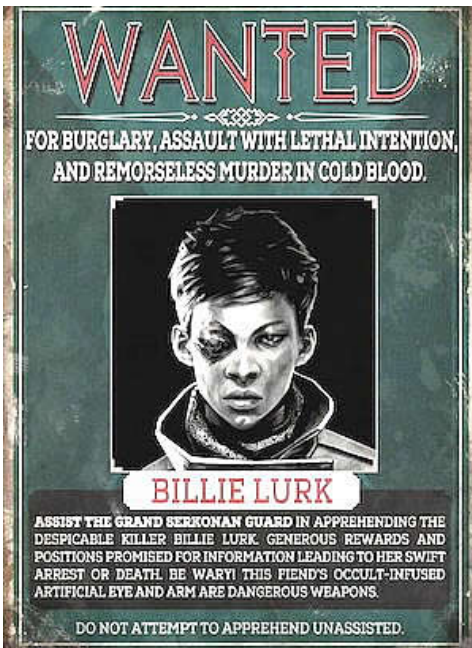
A Wanted poster for Billie Lurk.

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