

The Womb as a Sphere of Biopolitical Liminality in Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Biopolitical theories conceptualize the womb from various perspectives, though rather than focus on its space as such, they tend to incorporate it into the exploration of broader issues, such as mass-scale biopower (Foucault 1990), power and identity dynamics between the maternal organism and the fetus (Esposito 2011), subject integrity with regard to reproductive rights (Deutscher 2008), or patriarchal paradigm of technology (Braidotti 1994).

Two elements that most biopolitical conceptualizations of the womb have in common are: 1) the relatively unchallenged connection between it and the maternal subject, and 2) the relevance of the womb as a liminal sphere or a boundary between oppositions such as the outside vs. the inside, the seen vs. the unseen, qualified life vs. bare life, or self vs. other.

While biopolitics has so far found various applications in the realm of game studies – for instance with regard to the avatar (Apperley and Clemens 2016), death (Christiansen 2014), the player (Piero 2020, Lassila 2022), play (Rutherford and Bose 2013) or MMORPGs (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009) – the existent biopolitical approaches to video games do not seem to engage the womb concept on a large scale.

Themes revolving around corporeal maternity in video games have, in turn, been explored among others by Ewan Kirkland (2010), Sarah Stang (2019), John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne (2018), and Dan Goad (2022) with regard to its horror potential and abjection; by Lauren Cruikshank (2015) with regard to pregnancy; or Amy M. Green (2022), who addresses the motif of the womb directly, but in the specific context of *Death Stranding*.

Therefore, in this presentation I intend to show that video games, as a medium intensely engaging visualizations of space, constitute a prolific and diversified environment for the analysis of biopolitical liminalities reflected by the womb,

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whether understood as an actual organ, visual symbol or conceptual metaphor. Considering several exemplary games, I argue for their visuality and mechanics not only to illustrate the versatility of the womb's biopolitical significance, but also to expand it.

Firstly, I consider the liminality of the womb in terms of shifts from potentiality to action, as well as shifts of agency between the player and the gameworld. For this purpose, I turn to Justyna Janik's application of the intra-action theory to video games (2022) in order to explore the womb as a biopolitical space of power dynamics between the game's plot, aesthetics and affordances resonating with the player's presence.

Secondly, I explore the possibility for the video-game womb space to emancipate and function in separation from the discursive frameworks of pregnancy and maternity. Tracking down different manifestations of the womb's biopolitical significance, I proceed from the discussion of *Fantastic Fetus* (2019) and *Death Stranding* (2019) as embracing representational aspects of the womb to *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Days Gone* (2019) as more reliant on its functional dimensions.

The analysis is aimed to both consider the impact of the video games on the biopolitical conceptualizations of the womb space and identify its theoretical productivity in the critical exploration of games' aesthetic and spatial dimensions.

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