

# Introducing Biopolitics Analysis Framework

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The main problem I am going to explore is related to the relation between biopolitical systems and their representation or ludotopian implementation in digital games (Günzel and Aarseth 2020; Maj 2021). My aim is to introduce an analytic framework for identifying different systems of governing populace and life in games.

Biopolitics here is understood as a systemic, sociological, political and economic strategy of governing life. The notion itself is grounded in philosophical and sociological works analyzing the historical evolution of various institutions and policies concerning healthcare, demography and life quality (Esposito 2008, 2012)(Foucault 2010; Rose 2009). Biopolitical problematic touches upon subjects such as reproduction rights(Mills 2011), political and judiciary framework of life (Agamben 1998; Esposito 2008), immunization and communization (Esposito 2012), biomedicalization of everyday life (Rose 2009), political production of enemies and strategies of maximalization of killing (Mbembe 2016, 2020). The biopolitical problematic can be seen as a map of different areas where policies, mechanisms of power and control are deployed to govern contemporary social, political and economic functioning of humanity. The major trends in this governance can be seen as paradigmatic and defined along the lines of strategies of protection or negation of life (Esposito 2017).

Many game scholars have researched various problems related to biopolitics in digital games. Contemporary ludic studies on biopolitics offer numerous angles of approach to singular game problems, yet no research focuses on aggregating and mapping their overall contribution to what might be called a subfield of game biopolitics. Most notable studies focus on: the role of avatar as a vehicle of biopolitical strategies (Apperley and Clemens 2016; Zarzycka 2017; Gordon et al. 2009), questions concerning identity (Baerg 2013), representations of health in games (Rogers 2020; Köhle et al. 2021), mechanics and power relations (Wencel 2015; Piero 2020; Kłosiński 2020), interface design (Lenkevich 2021), relations between biopower and play (Kattenberg 2015; Väliäho 2014; Rutheford and Bose 2013; Christiansen 2014), and

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finally, politics of death in play (Christiansen 2014; St. Jacques and Tobin 2020; McAllister and Ruggill 2018). This is where biopolitics analysis framework comes into play as a framework for connecting various theoretical and critical studies of biopolitics in social sciences and humanities, with contemporary inquiries into specific issues related to games and play and producing a unified framework for researchers to use in their studies.

The aim here is therefore to present this analytic procedure called biopolitics analysis framework which will delineate simple steps and ways for identifying biopolitical markers (significant game elements pointing to strategies of life governance) and their interconnections. The framework consists of three elements: A) a set of research questions informed by biopolitical theory; B) definitions of biopolitical marker and biopolitical paradigm; C) a research matrix to be supplemented with data. The framework is therefore a set of instructions which will inform researchers in their analytical and interpretative endeavors. The idea of this framework is inspired by available analytical frameworks, namely the player character research framework (Fizek 2014), MDA and its advancements (Walk, Görlich, and Barrett 2017) and game analysis frameworks based in Actor-Network Theory (Vozaru 2022). The framework encompasses all three areas in which games have been analyzed using biopolitical theories: (1) In-game representations and mechanics; (2) Games as ludotopias where biopolitics finds extension; (3) Games as biopolitical apparatuses themselves. The aim of this framework is therefore very simple, to produce a questionnaire interconnecting philosophical, sociological and economic biopolitical problematic to possible analytical anchor points presented in and by digital games.

The most fundamental question for the framework is how does a game represent life. What I want to look at are: interfaces, narrative assumptions and mechanics. The aim here is to distinguish basic elements constructing the idea of life in our game: is a singular unit reserved to the player avatar or a populace to be governed, a simple unit represented by a token or a complex structure of health and needs.

The second inquiry concerns the things the game asks us to do with life. What I am interested here are: victory conditions, implicit and explicit goals, procedural rhetoric, game loops, and gameplay justification. Here, I want to identify the vectors for the biopolitical analysis: are we there to govern life, or are we there to exterminate it, or maybe just to control a singular existence striving to survive in harsh environment?

The third inquiry concerns the analysis of power assemblages and dispositives. Here, I am interested in the inner workings and interconnections of life governance systems deployed in game. In short: how do we save life, how do we exterminate enemies, how are we informed certain places are off limits, how do we produce or reproduce life. The inquiry into dispositives brings me to the critical juncture between what governs the game representation of life and the life of the player. At this point I take into account the relationship between the game as a biopolitical device and its user.

The biopolitics analysis framework procedure will be deployed under the following assumptions. First, most games operate with some indicators referencing politics of life as part of their algorithmic governance of avatar HP (Mitchell 2018). This aspect of games will not be considered as a paradigm forming condition in itself. Second, and similar to the first condition, the act of killing will not be treated as a good enough reason to formulate a paradigm with use of the framework. Third assumption is that biopolitical paradigms are not omnipresent, and in that regard they differ from other forms of game specification such as genre patterns or ludonarrative conventions.

Methodologically, my study is informed by qualitative data generated in play. The dataset consisted of 15 games representing different genres (shooters, strategy, RPG, adventure). The method for the analysis of research material was game hermeneutics (Kłosiński 2022; Fiadotau 2018; Karhulahti 2015; Roth, van Nuenen, and Koenitz 2019; Arjoranta 2015).

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