BAD MOTHERS AND FETUSES FROM OTHER DIMENSIONS: PHALLIC MOTHERS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH IN VIDEO GAMES

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Video games are a recent medium compared to film or literature, but boast an immense cultural output. Their production values have escalated alongside their popularity. During this prolific history, most developers have ignored or misrepresented female characters and issues. However, the patriarchal perspectives that have given birth to certain ubiquitous tropes are not new, as they are rooted in earlier reactions to the presence of female literary production in Western culture (Francus, 2013).

Still, video games possess a unique device: player agency. It is defined as the ability of players to have effects and cause change in a virtual game world (Eng, 2020). It holds potential to create a powerful impression of the cultural perspectives it bears, in addition to engaging audiences in a more direct experience with them. When pregnancy, childbirth and parentcraft are at the core of a video game's narrative or gameplay, they are still distorted by patriarchal misrepresentation.

This paper puts forward a typology of representation of pregnancy in video games based on Barbara Creed's (1993) aspects

of the "monstrous feminine". Using the contrast between what she calls the pre-phallic "archaic mother" and what the Freudian imaginary considers the pre-Oedipal phallic mother, this article draws up a category of misrepresented pregnancy referred to as "the supernatural birth". To illustrate, three case studies will be analyzed, interpreting their symbolic systems according to their use of horror themes and and their grotesque portrayals of female fertility, sexuality, and reproduction. These are: *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015), *Dante's Inferno* (Electronic Arts, 2010), and *F.E.A.R. 3* (Warner Bros. Games, 2011).

Thus, I expect to contribute to ludology studies focusing on gender, and to invite academic discussion into the matter of female-specific issues being shunned by cultural representations in video games.

Keywords: Cultural studies; gender studies; pregnancy; motherhood; video games.

1. Introduction

In the age of media convergence, the growth of video games as marketable entertainment products has become nothing short of extraordinary. This stellar increase in popularity runs awkwardly parallel to the scarce research focused on the textuality of the ludic medium. Studies in representational strategies in video games are timidly making a dent in the vast landscape of academic research. Within that vast dimension, gender representation is one of the most vehemently discussed fields. When we look at video games at large, there still appears to be a general assumption that the target audience is made up of mostly cis-heterosexual males despite the fact that player demographics come in at nearly a 50 - 50 split in both the E.U. (ISFE 2022) and the U.S.A. (Statista 2023).

The copious repetition with which male characters are placed in the position of the playable main protagonist seems to be a clear symptom of gender-biased perceptions of the ludic medium and its consumers. A vast majority of players are extremely likely

to be looking mostly at a male body occupying a central position in the game world, in the midst of both gameplay and narrative. To be sure, female bodies frequently appear, albeit showing characteristics previously filtered through the lens of heteropatriarchal notions of female ideals and stereotypes. The abundance of male bodies and their modes of representation are worth researching on their own. However, this article will look at specific issues in female representation, as the gaming landscape has intensely focused on the presence of male protagonists within their fictions while assuming a heterosexual male player in front of the screen. Such bias has turned video game culture into 'not' a place for women where social constructs perpetuating binary oppositional gender roles have intruded to the point of chiseling into popular culture the idea that video games are the dominion of males (Antía Seoane & Maite Sanmartín 2019, 13). Yet, such assumptions are rooted in misogynistic stereotypes originating in historical moments long before video games could even be theorized. For that reason, this article will also rely on Marylin Francus' theories on the representation of motherhood and female reproduction in eighteenth-century English literature. The stereotypes she describes have been reiterated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the new media that these eras have produced. Therefore, establishing a link between those stereotypes and their reiteration in contemporary fiction formats is essential. For that matter, Barbara Creed's theories on the Monstrous-feminine will provide a basis for the analysis of audiovisual tropes portraying pregnancy and motherhood as devilish in video game design. A typology for one of the most common of such tropes will be proposed.

2. Context

The lack of attention to female sex-specific issues in gaming has created a void in different representational strategies for female characters, and certainly also in female perspectives on a wide variety of genres, narratives, and parts of the human experience. When it comes to female bodies, most representations tend to fall within a limited range of tropes. Each of these usually focuses around one stereotypical image of the female body, based on

heteropatriarchal interpretations of gender roles. All such images originate in heterosexual presumptions focused on gender performances, acting by means of excluding from the symbolic order any realities that do not conform to this model (María Lozano Estivalis, 2006). In the vast field of how video games produce and reiterate clichéd images of male and female stereotypes, pregnancy and childbirth are still among the most overlooked. These should not remain confined to their most literal representations but should include those that dwell in the symbolic realm and operate through metaphor.

Their presence in the ludic medium may take multiple forms. For instance, the conception, gestation, and birth of a child may take a central position in a game's narrative. In such games where players are able to affect the storyline, pregnancy may appear as an optional choice for narrative and character development. As for the latter —and due to the interactive nature of video games—, story is not always necessary for it to happen, as this medium allows for gameplay and character-building mechanics whose effect is noticed mainly through statistical changes and interactions between the player's avatar and the virtual game world. Furthermore, the existence of hostile denizens or 'enemies' in that world frequently provides fertile ground for grotesque, monstrous, and horror-inspired designs that embody female fertility, female sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth by means of symbolism. Before such strategies are specifically analyzed, it is of the essence to clarify one of the definitory characteristics that set video games apart from other media, which also provides the necessary interaction for players to engage with gameplay mechanics: player agency.

> Player agency is about giving players the interactivity to affect and change the game world. Through agency, players have power to influence and change what is happening in the game. It provides them control (or at least of sense of it) of what will happen next. This means that players should be given the ability to make decisions in the game. But these decisions shouldn't be trivial – at least from the player's perspective. (Dave Eng 2019)

Complementarily, there also exists the notion of 'choice' within any given video game's mechanics. Choices may be meaningful to different degrees, but the ludic medium evidently sets itself apart by the presence of this characteristic, as Katherine Isbister clearly states:

> At their heart, games differ from other media in one fundamental way: they offer players the chance to influence outcomes through their own efforts. With rare exception, this is not true of film, novels, or television. Readers and viewers of these other media follow along, reacting to the story and its twists and turns, without having a direct personal impact on the events they witness. In games, players have the ability to control what unfolds. (2017, 2)

What exactly constitutes player agency is generally challenging to pin down, but it certainly both enables and depends on players' abilities to make choices that influence the game world. Through a series of decisions, game progression proceeds forward, be it in the most simple and purely mechanical game —examples such as *Tetris* (Nintendo 1989) and *Super Hexagon* (Terry Cavanagh 2012) come to mind— or in a heavily-narrative story-driven game with ample options for character customization and a vast, crowded virtual world ripe for exploration —such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) —. In any case, the immediate consequence of this basis for design is that players quickly develop an emotional investment in the game: "People go through a rapid and automatic set of evaluations as things happen to them, about what each event might mean for their goals and plans. Emotions arise in the context of these appraisals, and help guide quick and appropriate actions" (Isbister 2017, 2).

It is easy to imagine the power that rhetorical texts such as video games can have in propagating cultural assumptions, stereotypes, clichés, prejudice, and misinterpretations. With the emotional stakes that games involve players in, their symbolic systems act as powerfully vivid fictions in which the cultural baggage of the people interacting with them may be either challenged or reinforced. Imagine someone accustomed to the gender binary power dynamics established by the patriarchal order being deeply engaged with a virtual world where women are

reduced to 'eye candy', damsels in distress, or chainmail-bikini-wearing warriors with the physical shape of a supermodel and scant character development. Jason Hawreliak provides a clear example of what analyzing such representations may yield: "Anita Sarkeesian's popular Feminist Frequency series has examined how many videogames depict women as weak, hyper-sexualized objects of straight male desire. Through this series, Sarkeesian convincingly demonstrates that videogames often reinforce patriarchal conventions of femininity by way of visual rhetoric" (2020, 21).

But such tropes are nothing new in Western society, as the work of Marilyn Francus shows. Her analysis of literary representations of female sexuality and reproduction as monstrous is instrumental for understanding where the video game tropes about pregnancy discussed below originate. Additionally, part of this analysis will draw from Barbara Creed's typologies of the monstrous feminine in horror films. This genre has been a goldmine for video game designers not only because it is also a category of fiction in the ludic medium, but also because it has provided frequently-borrowed visual elements to games across widely differing settings.

Eighteenth-century English literature reflects a time when the patriarchal system of values questions the female presence in changing models of political and social authority (Francus 2012, 26). The easiness for mass publication gave birth to a series of misogynistic tropes in literature, as the prolificity of print allowed women to be published more easily and more often, sparking in some prominent authors a fear of fertility that inspired in them monstrous visions of it, as long as it was independently female: "This literary rendering of fertile maternity correlates with contemporary thought regarding female sexuality, in which the inability to control her fertility (and the lack of desire to repress her sexuality) makes woman monstrous" (ibid.).

Marylin Francus focuses on Milton, Swift, Spenser and Pope with their portrayals of fecund female characters as hideous creatures with abhorrent animalistic bodies that spew forth hellish spawn (Sin in *Paradise Lost*, Criticism in *Battle of the Books*, Errour

in *The Faerie Queene*, and Dulness in *The Dunciad*). According to this author, such nightmarish mothers illustrate maternal agency and authority competing with and overturning patriarchal power. Its unpredictable and unknown fertility is a constant source of anxiety, as well as the cause for fear of the mother's access to the child's body, potentially resulting in his death (Francus 2012, 170). Parallel to literary conflicts, female reproductive capabilities (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, so forth) are commonly seen as and named "diseases", "disabilities" and "calamity" as medical science advances in the hands of exclusively male practitioners and physicians (ibid.).

Inevitably, the uterus occupies a central position in these ideological approaches. Being the *sine qua non* of procreation, it caused anxiety and jealousy among male authors conditioned by sexist perceptions of human nature and society, thus producing rhetorical and visual systems based upon binary opposition within the patriarchal imagination. Francus illustrates:

> The female body is a convenient site for chaos, as it is located between the created and the uncreated. The chaos of the female in these works is signified by the womb and its products, which embody darkness and void. The womb also generates anxieties attendant upon the inability to fill or illuminate such a space. The darkness of the maternal womb echoes the primordial darkness that is a precondition of divine creation, which begins with the invocation of light (Gen. 1:3). As light is established as a masculine positive associated with order and reason, darkness is construed as its devilish opposite, a feminine force associated with chaos and the imagination. (2012, 28)

The author goes on to identify not just the monstrous female's body, but also the space she occupies within a symbolic womb. Such female creatures often dwell in dark damp spaces, which —to the patriarchal imagination— are reminiscent of the primordial void and non-existence. In video games, the darkness that floods such places often signals danger, and consequently they may be populated with hostile characters whose existence is directly or indirectly dependent upon the female monster. Such a creature is designated by Francus as a phallic mother: insufficiently passive and feminine

to be a mother, yet insufficiently masculine to be an authority (2012, 30). Thus, reproductive endeavors in women are considered a deviance from cultural expectations unless they submit themselves to patriarchal authority and the ideal of domesticity. Video games reproduce this trope frequently by showing female antagonists as monstrous in aspect and devious in behavior, in stark contrast to the hyper-sexualized vision of women on the male hero's side. In one mode of representation, as phallic mothers populate their dens (created digitally as video game levels) with their feral spawn, or as Francus puts it: "As monstrous mothers produce and rear their monstrous progeny in these darkened domiciles, nature perpetuates the unnatural" (2012, 29). She goes on to remind us of the insistence of the works she analyzes on linking the female domain exclusively with the creation of chaos, therefore putting forward an argument in favor of the necessity and even the primacy of the masculine:

> The negative inscription of the female reflects both the tendency to revise in favor of the male and the oppositional relationship between the sexes; what constitutes strength in the female weakens the male, and therefore female power must be reinterpreted in order to be subjugated (ibid.).

This is eerily similar to the stereotypical male hero in video games delving into the domain of female or otherwise feminized characters in order to conquer such a place and defeat its monstrous ruler, often taking the form of 'bosses': "Unique characters or creatures that are more complex and challenging to defeat than normal enemies" (Theodore Agrogianis 2018, 1).

The 'monstrous feminine' is also at the center of Barbara Creed's homonymous book (1993). In it, she sorts different modes of representation of female antagonists in horror films into several categories. Particularly relevant to this article are her vision of the phallic mother, and her predecessor: the archaic mother (Creed 1993, 16). She provides a key idea for understanding the role of the monstrous in spectators' —or, as is the case in this article, players'— emotional reactions: "Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (ibid.). This

statement not only clarifies what the role of watching horror films or having horror-themed encounters in games is, but it also resonates with the literature criticized by Francus, which took place in a time where the stability of patriarchy felt as if it was being put into question (2012, 26).

The archaic mother is described by Creed following a series of key characteristics that prove problematic for the patriarchal imagination. One involves the acts of procreation and birth taking place without the agency of the opposite sex, delivering a creature that is primitive rather than civilized, suggesting that humanity is thus brought closer to an animal form, being confronted with an image reminiscent of its own ancestors (1993, 17). Another key aspect is that of the fecund 'mother-as-abyss'. She is the void itself, and confronting her is facing the primordial darkness that Francus links to the uterus as seen by the patriarchal imagination: a space of duality, capable of producing and nurturing a child, yet also of killing it (2012, 28). She is the cannibalizing black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns; in film, she is the source of the deepest terror (Creed 1993, 27). As in the movies, so it is in video games, also enabling player agency and choice.

However, the archaic mother is construed in patriarchal ideology by bringing her closer to the mother of the semiotic *chora* (Creed 1993, 20). She is a negative force whose presence as a black hole is identified with female genitalia, and her main role is to give birth to horrific offspring who aid her in destroying or incorporating everything in her path (Creed 1993, 27). Comparatively, Francus stated of eighteenth-century English literary monstrous fecund females: "By giving birth these monsters produce death"; and "[o]nce the battle against wit and reason is won and the world is destroyed, there is little left for the maternal monster to achieve" (2012, 41). Such condemnation of the feminization of literature is akin to a contemporary demonization of the feminization of video games, and it reduces the archaic mother to something that the patriarchal order can understand and expunge. In Creed's view, the archaic mother is therefore reduced from the generative pre-phallic mother to the pre-Oedipal phallic (or dyadic) mother (1993, 25). The codification of the concept of female reproduction as a monstrous aspect that can be visually represented in video game design carries

over the same strategy, and takes it further by making the encounter between patriarchal values and the monstrous feminine interactive and engaging. This is best summed up in Francus' words:

> The fertile monster herself is emblematic of this fusion of opposites; monstrous maternity produces chaos by blurring the traditional psychologies of gender, in which femininity and authority do not coexist. Accordingly, the maternal monster is a phallic mother who is targeted as being insufficiently passive and feminine to be maternal and insufficiently masculine to function as a legitimate authority. Thus maternity is both denatured and demonized, as the empowerment of the archetypal feminine destroys all that it encounters. (2012, 29)

I argue that this archetype is one of the most widespread representational strategies for pregnancy and motherhood across Western video games, especially given their ease to confer monstrous qualities on an enemy character to make it clearly identifiable as an antagonist for players. The result is a mixture of archetypes and semiotic symbols that mostly respond to the misogynistic cliches denounced by Marilyn Francus, with fewer instances of differing archetypes, and even pregnancy- and motherhood-related issues that have become conspicuous for their absence. Most examples are unfortunate, as they try to grapple with the unavoidable oversimplification that comes with reducing an ever-complex, nuanced and delicate biological and emotional process to a mere gameplay mechanic, narrative device or statistical choice.

The result is that women's experiences during pregnancy and childbirth are simply left out. Their representations, in addition to following the aforementioned strategies, often swing between the comical and the grotesque, occasionally superimposing both, severely deforming the process while keeping its essential visual elements recognizable, and alienating any players who may be interested in or have gone through the experience of gestation, birth, and motherhood —not to mention the wealth of experiences that surround each of these.

Based on the archetypes described by Francus and Creed, this article puts forward one of the main modes of representation of female fertility and pregnancy in video games as a representational typology serving as an umbrella for several symbolic patterns stemming from the same patriarchal perception of female fertility without male control. From here on, it shall be referred to as: the supernatural birth.

3. The Supernatural Birth

Representations that fall within this category are all marked by the following set of characteristics, taken from the authors previously commented on: the central element is a phallic mother, a monstrous fecund female who breeds monstrous children that bring about chaos against the order of patriarchal authority; she is a destructive force; she lives in darkness, often in an enclosed space symbolizing the primordial void associated with maternal womb; she violates codes of proper female behavior as 'set in stone' by the patriarchal order, certainly defying ideals of domesticity (Francus 2012, 28). More often than not, players assume the position of the male hero proving his worth (therefore, paternal authority) against this monster. In some exceptions not discussed here, the player in fact assumes the role of the pregnant female in a fight for the elimination of her own supernatural fetus or the birth of a healthy child who unknowingly holds supernatural power, implying the potential for an infanticidal drive, albeit often symbolic. The case studies presented in this article are: *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015), *Dante's Inferno* (Electronic Arts, 2010), and *F.E.A.R. 3* (Warner Bros. Games, 2011).

3.1. *Bloodborne* - Queen Yharnam

In this *lovecraftian* horror action RPG, players take on the mantle of a 'hunter', a trained slayer of unnatural beasts who makes his or her way through a city enveloped in darkness. Such beasts (formerly humans) overrun the place during certain nights, temporarily retreating at dawn. However, the night during which the game takes place threatens to last forever due to the presence of the Blood

Moon, which is associated with a higher being known as Mergo. This entity belongs to a cosmic race of semi-divine creatures known as "Great Ones". Mergo's consciousness is awake, yet they never manifest physically, and they are only perceptible by the sound of a baby crying coming from the night sky and the Blood Moon. In the end, this being never fully comes to life, instead remaining stillborn. The player character must ensure that Mergo's presence is never fully embodied, lest the creature becomes fully aware and unleashes its power upon the world, making the night eternal and allowing in perpetuity the curse of the beastly sickness that is consuming the world's denizens. Due to Mergo's inability to manifest into the world, players confront instead a monstrous supernatural being known as "Mergo's Wet Nurse", though it bears no gender signifiers.

While this game is intentionally unclear when it comes to providing story details —instead relying on context clues and item descriptions to allow players to make sense of the story and game world lore—, it is made clear through visual cues who Mergo's mother is. The former ruler of the city, Queen Yharnam belongs to an enduring humanoid race known as 'pthumerians'. She conceived Mergo via (presumably) the influence of a Great One. She is encountered by the player mostly in non-interactive form during cutscenes, though there is an instance where the main character can find her during gameplay, though she provides no interaction. She can also be faced as a *boss* in one of the game's optional dungeons. Yharnam is always seen wearing a bridal gown stained by a bleeding wound visibly originating from her belly, implying —with help from the context— that it is coming from her uterus, as she did not succeed in fully birthing Mergo. She weeps at the Blood Moon, supposedly lamenting her child's struggle to be born. There are gameplay clues that have been discussed as symbolizing how her corrupted blood condemned her supernatural fetus.

There is a powerful symbolism of infanticide in the wound on Yharnam's belly, in her poisonous blood (if she is fought as a boss, she sprays her own blood at the player character, inflicting the "rapid poison" status effect), and in the hunter's violent actions. It should also be noted that the Blood Moon —where Mergo's cries

appear to be coming from— bears an extraordinary size and an eerie red-orange coloring, which is reminiscent of a swollen pregnant belly, a uterus, or even a human egg. Though he/she never physically confronts Mergo, the hunter prevents their full awakening into the world by slaying Mergo's guardian, the Wet Nurse. It is worth mentioning that the player may choose to control a female hunter, but at the same time, this plot is set in motion by a higher-authority male hunter, who also plays a crucial role in whether and how the night ends.

Were Yharnam's child to be fully born, its power would maintain the curse of the blood that turns people into beasts and it would develop into a full-fledged Great One. This can be read as matching the trope of the monstrous fecund female destroying everything around her in an endless appetite deprived of reasoning (associated with the male). Thus, the hunter's male-endowed authority exercises control over the female's offspring, restoring peace, reason and control to the world. Yharnam's pregnancy is also reminiscent of the archaic mother, as she is implied to have been impregnated by an unseen supernatural being, and therefore it appears as if she had done so by herself (Creed 1993, 27). She is generative and positioned as an unstable element for the patriarchal order.

3.2. *Dante's Inferno* - Cleopatra and Mark Antony

In this horror-themed reinterpretation of Dante Allighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, the writer is instead a warrior returned from the crusades to find his wife assassinated and taken to Hell by Lucifer himself. Dante descends through the underworld, and in the third level —associated with lust— he must fight a gigantic nightmarish version of Cleopatra.

To be precise: a monstrous Mark Antony fights in her name —seeing as strength is a presupposed male characteristic— and Cleopatra supports him through the use of other devices and distractions for the player, which falls in line with Francus' hypothesis of the womb serving as a symbol of intellectual deception in English literary works that condemn female reproductive capabilities (2012, 36). This is a typical iteration of the

system of binary oppositions representing men as strong and warlike while women employ less direct, more manipulative tactics. If players succeed in the virtual fight, it culminates in the defeat of Mark Antony, prompting Cleopatra to try to seduce Dante, who resists temptation and slays her as she moans sexually, the warrior's blade literally penetrating her flesh while he is lying on top of her. This is an obvious penetration metaphor, but also one for the elimination of maternal authority outside the symbolic order.

But how is Cleopatra a mother? In this extremely grotesque representation of the historical character, her gigantic body shows her bare breasts with mouths on her nipples (an example of *vagina dentata*). Through these, she expels horrifying murderous monstrous children who hurt the player character, so that both hero and enemy are infanticidal: Cleopatra for spewing forth her children to die for her; Dante for killing them to defend himself. In addition, Mark Antony lives inside her body, leaving it when she regurgitates him to fight for her. According to Francus' research, this would be a visual representation of the disgust of patriarchal perceptions finding acts of mothering physically disgusting (2012, 26). So, the mother is a bad nurturer violating the code of proper female behavior. Dante is effectively eliminating the monstrous progeny that can only act as destroyers, preventing chaos. In conclusion, Cleopatra is the archetypal infanticidal mother: selfish, powerful and dangerous.

3.3. *F.E.A.R. 3* - Alma Wade

The reason for choosing the third installment of this trilogy is that the second game shows how the main antagonist of the entire arc becomes pregnant, with her successful gestation being the main point of the third game's story. Alma Wade possesses extraordinary psychic powers. She spent her childhood being experimented on by a corporation trying to weaponize her for profit. While still a teenager, she is used as a breeder to bear children who will inherit her gift. The conception takes place artificially while she is held into an induced coma. She eventually dies, but she endures as a spirit. After certain key events in the first game, her physical body is

resurrected, appearing as a young emaciated woman but keeping her psychic and spiritual powers.

In the second game, she rapes the protagonist, becoming pregnant with a child whose birth threatens the world. This near-apocalyptic event sits at the center of the third game's conflict. As the birth draws near, Alma's psychic world starts merging with the real world, which would eventually result in the consumption of the latter. Commonly known as the *Almaverse*, this is a parallel dimension that exists within her mind but can *leak* into the real world, filling it with monsters born of her imagination and her memories from past traumatic experiences. It can be seen here that there is a representation pattern that follows the key elements in Francus' theory, as female imagination holds dangers for gestation and seems to be the domain of the manipulative fertile female (2012, 36). Almaverse takes several visual forms in the third game, but one of the most noticeable is a reddened sky crossed by lightning bolts and a sort of 'swelling' in the clouds, reminiscent of the changes of a pregnant body. In fact, her cries of labor pain can be heard throughout the game's locales, and psychic disturbances and explosions occur as her contractions intensify. In all manifestations of this dimension, leaking blood is one of the most striking visual characteristics.

In this last installment, players may choose to play as either of Alma's adult children: Point Man or Paxton Fettel, with each of them unlocking a different ending. In the finale, she is seen fully pregnant in a monstrous manner: her womb has grown to unnaturally oversized proportions, it emits a reddish glow, and it produces some sort of membranes that adhere to walls in order to support itself. In this state, she is completely vulnerable and unable to move. This is a visual representation of the concept of obstetric literature starting to refer to pregnancy and menstruation as the "source of numerous calamities", and women as meant to be managed by men when pregnant, starting in the eighteenth century (Francus 2012, 42). Despite advancements in obstetric technology and scientific/medical knowledge, this notion has not disappeared from modern society.

Regardless of which ending plays out, Alma disappears (she is clearly killed in one of the endings, while the other shows her body dematerializing), and with her, the threat of Almaverse destroying the real world. In the 'good' ending, Point Man overpowers Fettel, killing him. He rescues Alma's baby, who has been successfully born. The child is not seen as dangerous, for it is brought into the patriarchal order by a father figure, away from the chaotic and apocalyptic female power of his phallic mother. Even the sky over the city loses the red tint and thunderstorms, becoming blue and luminous once again, echoing Francus' words on the patriarchal 'mission' to illuminate the dark primordial void of the symbolic womb (2012, 28). By contrast, in the 'bad' ending, it is Fettel who wins the struggle against his sibling. It is important to note that the former has more developed psychic powers as a result of his consciousness having been merged with Alma's for some time during his childhood, turning him more violent. The influence of his phallic mother makes him abandon reason and unleash chaos, as this is the effect of maternal authority as seen by the symbolic order (Francus 2012, 28). Fettel talks about raising the baby as his own, but he still kills Alma in a particularly cruel way, as he literally cannibalizes her. He devours her body, including her overemphasized uterus, presumably to gain more extraordinary power from her. This is a different manner to bring the baby into the patriarchal order, as the brother with the feminine remnant is still seen as deviant, and therefore this is considered a bad story ending. It bears mention that Barbara Creed has suggested that in horror films, "when male bodies become grotesque, they tend to take on characteristics of the female body" (1993, 19). While this takes no literal form in Fettel, he does physically consume his mother's body, and his powers (which set him apart from other people psychically and physically) were inherited from her.

As if Alma's pregnancy were not enough, the game also includes different multiplayer game modes for users to play online by following different sets of rules and specific circumstances of the game world. One of these modes is called *Contractions*. In it, a team of players must fend off hordes of Alma's minions while an ever-expanding blinding fog encroaches on them by leaving a constantly-

dwindling circular space in the middle. The villain herself makes several appearances during the course of the game to act as a wildcard that throws in additional difficulties for the players. This is a prime example of how the ambivalent symbolic uterus can be constructed not only in game world and character design, but also by programming game mechanics.

4.   Discussion

The scrutinized titles bear the characteristics of Francus' phallic mother, codified as such from the more inscrutable archaic mother as per Creed's description. The same pattern is repeated across dozens of other video game works with slight variations, but with the same key elements in place. These female characters are represented as defying conventional femininity, domesticity and the expectations set for "good mothers". All of these issues are amply discussed by Marilyn Francus, but about the latter, she concisely states: "That actual maternal performance and circumstance had no effect on social expectations suggests the rigidity of maternal stereotypes and the insistence upon controlling maternal narrative" (2012, 47). This also holds in video games, where gender tropes are easily reproducible and have come to be expected in a society whose exposure to such is almost constant and comes from every available fiction format. The children of the women discussed in this article are all threats to the established order, brought to life by chaotic female characters, their offspring malformed or corrupted by their *bad mother's* mind or bodily characteristics. In all three instances, the birthing act is meant to end in death for the spawn of these women's generative capacities. While that can be said about Alma's minions spawning from the dimension she creates with her mind, it is not true of her third child, who is adopted by either of the two protagonists. Instead, we witness the elimination of the monstrous female threat, preventing the formation of the new subject under the influence of the abject mother. According to Imogen Tyler, for the child being born, this is the first encounter with abjection, as it is now outside the protective yet oppressive space of the womb, occupying a space between *being* and *non-being* (Imogen Tyler 2009, 2). Commenting on Julia Kristeva's primary abjection, the

author sums up: "Within the model of subjectivity [Kristeva] proposes, the infant's bodily and psychic attachment to his/her maternal origins must be successfully and violently abjected in order for an independent and cogent speaking human subject to be born" (2009, 3). In *F.E.A.R. 3*, the visual representation of this interpretive perspective is quite literal, with Alma being killed or at least physically disappearing from existence before one of the protagonists walks away with her child.

Such phenomenologies are frequent enough in video games today that they prompt their own typology of representation of pregnancy and childbirth. In such works, female fertility is almost never represented as conventional or taking place through natural means, and the female body is rarely shown in a non-grotesque pregnant state. The divine, the devilish and the otherworldly are the driving forces that conceive their threatening offspring, lacking proper paternal nurturing. Thus, the Supernatural Pregnancy acts as a narrative device that sets gestation up as the origin of chaos that may devour the world. Players' actions set in motion the plot that allows them to discover this fact, but they are also the instrument to terminate it, not only allowing the story to come to an end, but also deriving satisfaction after overpowering the symbolic enemies.

Such emphasis being placed on monstrous fertility as a characteristic of female bodies does not belong exclusively to video games produced in the twenty-first century, as the idea is centuries older. As Francus herself states: "According to eighteenth-century gynecology, the power of fertility resided primarily in the female body. Yet the maternal body is a mystery, either insufficiently fertile or too fertile, at once capable of producing monsters and normally shaped children" (2012, 198).

5.   Conclusion

Fear of parenthood is a recurring theme within the fluidity of Western fiction and popular culture, and the human gestation process still remains largely mysterious for males. This mostly leads game developers, designers, and writers to repeat 300-year-old tired

tropes on female sexuality and fertility to fill in the gaps left by this absence of knowledge. If such ideas are still being repeated with no critical perspective, the situation speaks volumes as to what kind of society and culture informs the choices of game developers when managing representations of sexuality, pregnancy, motherhood, and fatherhood. It is no wonder that the phallic mother has such a long history and ample presence in this digital medium. Moreover, there are other modes of representation, each prompting its own issue-ridden typology. The general landscape of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood representation in games seems to be perpetuating the fears, anxieties and misconceptions of development teams, still mostly comprised of male staff and struggling to adopt fair maternity policies in the workplace (Stacy Henley, 2020).

While the solution may still not be in sight, it seems clear that widening the range of representational strategies for the sex-specific issues discussed above starts with allowing more female perspectives to share their experiences in video game design. The lack of knowledge on pregnancy and maternity is also a pressing matter, and easily solved. The study by Alexandra Holloway, Zachary Rubin and Sri Kurniawan points the way:

> Just as game designers study physics prior to building a physics engine, and study human motion prior to creating animated avatars, designers should investigate childbirth prior to creating a birth scene. Games teach players a way of thinking about the domain. Most video game players will go on to be mothers or those in a role of childbirth support. Young players in particular can benefit from an early intervention for positive women's body image, perceptions of pregnancy and childbirth, breastfeeding, and the childbirth process (2012, 8).

Not every video game needs to be an educational experience. Games, just like films, TV series, or music may be enjoyed just for the sake of entertainment. But that does not mean that development and representation cannot show responsibility when representing pregnancy and childbirth, particularly when a game is presented as a massive, serious endeavor with compelling storytelling and engaging gameplay that invites reflection as well as eagerness to play again. Female voices have been fighting for a bigger presence in the industry for a long time, and they should not be shut down

with misogynistic tropes so vividly burned into the Western collective imagination that they lock out the complex realities of women's experiences.

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