

Andrew Garcia

Audience: Students Playing and Studying *Limbo* and *Inside*

Purpose: Analysis of *Limbo* and *Inside*

Voice: Casual

Lacanian Themes in *Limbo* and *Inside*

The video games, *Limbo* (Playdead 2010) and *Inside* (Playdead 2016), are primal simulations of life in dystopian worlds. In both games you assume the role of a faceless child and must navigate through a dangerous and surreal environment. I believe that many of the games' themes can be dissected and analyzed through the psychoanalytical lens of Jacques Lacan.

In my interpretation of Lacan's writings, children discover themselves in a mirror at around 6 months old, in a phase called the Mirror Stage (Lacan 2006). They realize that they are an entity, separate from their mother, and they are in control of their own body. Relatively, a mirror moment is an instance when someone feels connection or alienation to a subject (feeling what emotions are presented before them.)

In Lacanian belief, children do not acquire a language until they are around 18 months old. Life in this phase is called the Imaginary. The Imaginary is a primitive binary reality of plenitude and lack, or positive and negative experiences. Infants are either hungry or satiated, hot or cold, happy or sad, etc. Language acquisition occurs when the newly discovered self (post-Mirror Stage) develops needs to explain, and to symbolically feel in control of what happens to it. After language acquisition, the world is no longer a black and white binary experience, but a gray mass of our attempts to rationalize our experiences through language.

Limbo arguably takes place in an Imaginary world. In the game, you are either in danger or safe, dead or alive, etc. There is no language in the game, only visual aspects and sound cues. The in-game environment ranges from a dark forest inhabited by a gigantic killer spider, to a warped and hazardous cityscape, to a derelict mining factory in a cavern—all depicted in black and white (Example 1.) This twisted world is so different from our reality, that it alienates you and renders you unable to rationalize situations. The game allows for your instincts to take over and necessitates interaction and reaction to the world in the game.



Example 1: *Limbo*. The German expressionism-inspired environment.

In *Limbo*, you play as a small child, seen as a silhouette whose only discernable feature is a set of blinking white eyes. The child does not speak or convey any interpretable emotions, so, through many mirror moments in the game, you project your emotions upon him.

Inside is a more complex game than its predecessor. Like *Limbo*, *Inside* is an Imaginary dystopic world. There is no language to quantify or to rationalize experiences; you only have your instincts (and a need to quickly adapt to obstacles) to survive.

One obstacle in *Inside* involves being dropped into a march of mind-controlled zombies. You are closely monitored by a surveillance machine (which is much more psychologically effective than a human guard, for "He is seen, but he does not see;" (Foucault 1975: 200). If you miss a step in mimicking the march, you are penetrated and electrocuted by a taser-like projectile wire (Example 2). This can be seen as an in-game societal hostility towards being in control of yourself (and can also represent an effort to keep you in the Imaginary, and out of the mirror stage and beyond. The in-game establishment does not want you to acquire language development because then they would not have control over you.)



Example 2: *Inside*. Automated electrocution of those who do not comply.

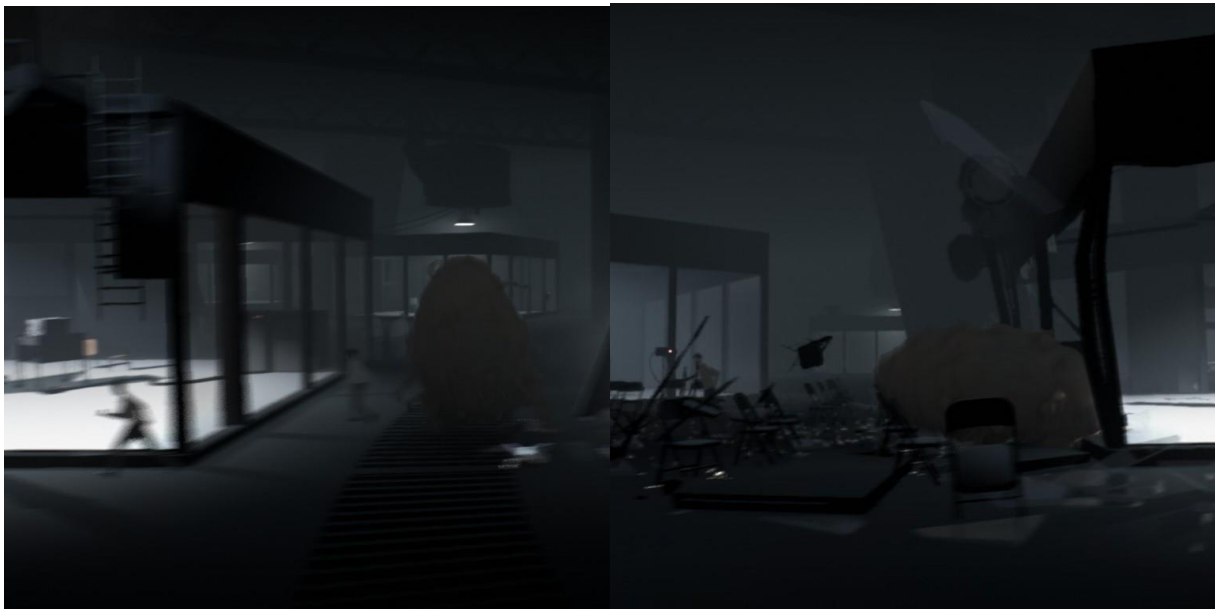
As you progress through *Inside*, your character's vocalization becomes goes from being nonexistent to being more audible through grunts of pain and exertion. This is drastically different from the mute protagonist of *Limbo*, and symbolizes this character's approach to

language acquisition, and assumedly with it, an ability to better understand and rationalize the things that happen.

The events of the game leading to its finale are surprising. You make your way through a laboratory-like facility filled with puzzles, traps, and ghastly humanoid experiments. Soon, a large commotion stirs among scientists around a large aquarium. You are unable to see what is inside it, until you fall into the tank of water itself. Suspended within it, is a grotesque mass of human flesh and limbs, moaning in agony, and connected to life support systems. Your character (now nude) attempts to unplug the entity (whether you aim to free it or to destroy it is unclear.) You end up being absorbed and trapped within it. The blobby mass is interpretably an actualized depiction of Anzieu's "scattered bits" of flesh (Anzieu 1989: 157) —an archaic fantasy of pre-ego body parts. Before this point in the game, your character's ego is determined to escape this prison-like dystopia, but after merging with this chaotic flesh, your new goal is not as defined as before—you assume control of the blob and just wreak havoc on the in-game world, killing and destroying everything in your path until you land upon a beach in the sunlight, where you remain until the end credits roll. This is a great representation of Lacan's theory that if we were to experience the greatest possible pleasure or desire (in the case of *Inside*, escaping the prison) or the greatest possible pain (being devoured by the mass) we would find ourselves in the Real, which is an unfathomably gruesome reality, a realm "of being, beyond appearances ... impossible to imagine [or] attain in any way" (Evans 1996: 162-163), from which there is no return (like the mass of flesh itself). So in the end of *Inside*, your ego's goal was accomplished, but not without the shocking discovery of the Real. And in joining with the Real, you descend into gruesome chaos.



Example 3: *Inside*. Discovering the mass, moments before being consumed by it.



Example 4: *Inside*. Assuming control of the mass, causing much destruction and death.

Limbo and *Inside* are both great examples of a realized simulations of Lacanian concepts, in which you traverse Imaginary worlds, without language, with plenitude/lack binaries, and with multitudes of mirror moments and commentaries on the Mirror Stage.

Playdead (2010) *Limbo*.

Copenhagen: Playdead.

Playdead (2016) *Inside*.

Copenhagen: Playdead.

Lacan, Jacques. (2006) *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink.

New York and London: W. Norton and Company.

Foucault, Michel (1975). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*.

New York: Random House.

Anzieu, Didier. (1989) *The Skin Ego*.

New Haven: Yale University Press.

Evans, Dylan. (1996) *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

London and New York: Routledge Press.