

MUAG 4200

Dr. Schwarz

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Benjamin Lyke

Paper Assignment 3

The game Limbo is full of moments that evoke very specific feelings from the player.¹ A moment I would like to discuss in this paper is rather early in the game but stuck with me until I finished playing. There is a moment where our protagonist is faced with the danger of other people wielding blow-darts and trying to kill him. The only escape is to lead those people to their death, and this is a very powerful moment in the game in terms of the imagery and sound. I will go into detail on its effects by looking at discussions made by two scholars, Didier Anzieu, and Brian Massumi.

The first thing you will notice about this scene is the music and its quality to affect the mental state of the player. Didier Anzieu described the sound bath in his discussion, stating that the sound bath relates to the developmental state of babies because sound is the first recognition that babies have of others being different from themselves, prior to that babies are connected in this “sound bath” that makes them feel a connection to everything around.²

Anzieu reinforces his argument on the sound bath being necessary for development by saying:

Before the gaze and smile of the mother who feeds and cares for it reflect back to the child an image of itself that it can perceive visually and internalise in order to reinforce its Self and begin to develop its Ego, the bath of melody . . . offers it a first mirror of sound (Anzieu: 186).

¹Limbo is a game developed by PlayDead studio involving a young boy who traverses through puzzles and enemies in Limbo.

²Anzieu, Didier. "The Sound Envelop" in *The Skin Ego*. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Anzieu is saying here that this sound bath creates an independence and a comfort for the developing baby in the sense that it feels comfortable mirroring what it hears and it begins to develop its own ego. In the Limbo scene I am discussing you enter this area to a rising sound that lulls you into a sense of security. This calming sound to me put me into what Anzieu would describe as the “sound bath” because I felt comforted. However, this is quickly changed because the people shoot at our protagonist and the sound changes.

The comforting music is suddenly paired with a low rising tone that is gritty and eerie. This change relates to another discussion of Anzieu’s where he describes that sounds that are perceivably less comforting, when put in a “sound bath” scenario become aggravating to the audience.³

Anzieu described this phenomenon in terms of voices but it still stands regarding music when he discusses sounds that are:

[H]arsh (with a predominance of low-pitched sounds, which makes the hearer mix up the sounds and feel invaded by them). Such [sound] disrupts the constitution of the self: the bath of sounds no longer surrounds the person but becomes unpleasant (Anzieu: 187).

This negation of the calming effects of the “sound bath is present in this moment in the game because of the lower rising tone, that begins to almost sound like pained yells as they increase.

These sounds can be heard in the following sound object Example 1:

Example 1: mp3 of rising sounds in Limbo that cause a calming than jarring effect from the “sound bath.”

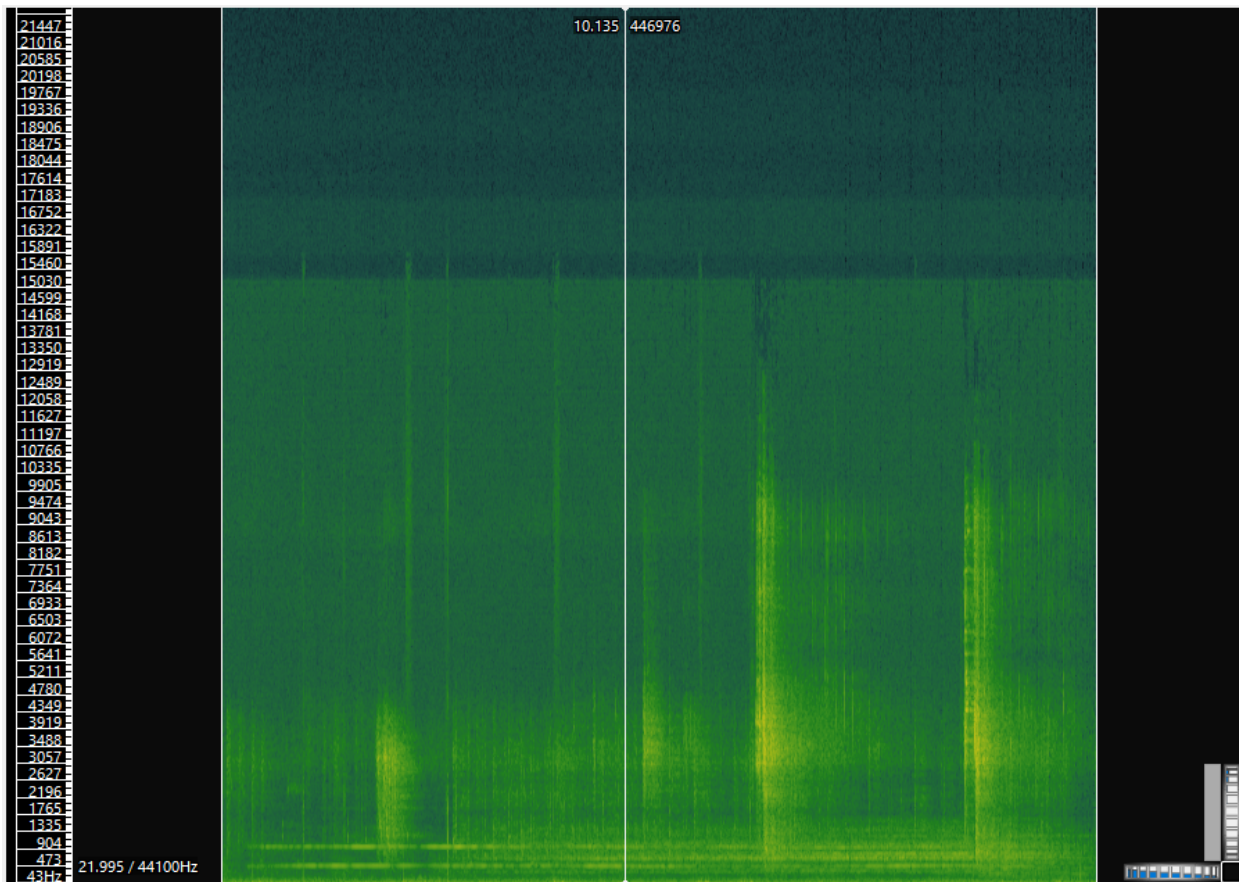


LimboBlowdartPeople.mp3

³ Anzieu, Didier. "The Sound Envelop" in *The Skin Ego*. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

To further interpret the sounds heard that cause the calming then unnerving affect please see a screenshot of a Sonic Visualizer screen that shows a softer sound rising into something fuller and anxiety inducing in Example 2:

Example 2: Sonic Visualizer screenshot of sound from moment in Limbo where protagonist is met by people with blow darts.



The screenshot above shows the increase in the intensity of the sound heard and while it is never aggressive or overtly loud there is still a definite change to it that brings out an uneasiness within the player.

Now, in terms of Brian Massumi's work I am going to discuss his description of the difference between "affect" and "emotion." To summarize his discussion, affect is the immediate

response to something but remains surface level and is often gone within moments. On the other hand, emotion is in a way a response to affect where the audience is responding to their immediate response and is interpreting that affect which then causes a lasting emotional response that is deeper and more shaping for individual personalities (Massumi: 88).⁴

This discussion of affect versus emotion is very prevalent in my gameplay because similar to my interpretation of the “sound bath” my response to this section transitions greatly from moment to moment.

From sight alone the moment is intimidating, you are coming across a group of people with weapons, this can be seen in a screenshot of the moment below as Example 3:

Example 3: Screenshot of moment of arrival upon group of people with blow-darts in Limbo.



The first response when seeing this scene is to be scared, we have seen other people in this game before and they have all tried to kill us, but for me, I was confused because the rising music made me feel comforted. The soft rise in the music reminded me of other games where

⁴ Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect" in *Cultural Critique*. number 31. Autumn 1995.

you would hear a similar soft rise and each time it was leading to a situation that was safe and freeing for the protagonist. Limbo tricked me by giving me a false sense of security to then force me to run for my life and cause these people's deaths.

This initial response to the people and the music is what Massumi describes as an affect, it is surface level and as soon as I was out of the area I was no longer in that state between comforted and scared. What followed however was a reflection that put me into an emotional state. While my fear was quickly abated, I began to reflect on the state of my protagonist's situation. While my character was just doing what he needed to do he, and I, were still at least partially responsible for the death of those three people.

To go further than that, I began to think of those people's emotional states, they are in the same situation as our protagonist, but we can assume they have been there longer due to their weaponry and camaraderie, and due to being there longer one must assume they have given up hope of escaping. While our protagonist is always looking and moving to the right, they look backwards to the left and hold a position they believe they can defend, they have given up hope. This emotional state stuck with me all the way through the end of the game because the final scene shows a young girl, I'm assuming the boy's sister, at a grave. This immediately made me think of religious customs where the dead are unable to pass on from limbo until they are properly buried and that was the moment of our protagonist's passing on. This brings more of an emotional response because when you realize those other people have given up hope you realize that while our protagonist was alone in this game, he was the only one with any help. The other people are stuck with no one trying to bury them and allow them to pass on.

The game Limbo was a veritable rollercoaster of affect, but overall keeps the player in a somber emotional state. The moment I described involved three people who our protagonist must

run from and lead to their deaths, while this seems simple enough, I have discussed using a screenshot of the game, a screenshot of the sonic visualizer of, and the music of how this scene relates to both Massumi's and Anzieu's discussions on affect versus emotion, and the "sound bath" respectively. This small moment near the beginning of the game packs so much into it, mainly because of the music, that it stuck with me through the end.

Works Cited:

Anzieu, Didier. "The Sound Envelop" in *The Skin Ego*. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect" in *Cultural Critique*. number 31. Autumn 1995.