

## The Affect and Emotion of Murdering a (Not so) Innocent Spider

One of the most amazing things that video games are able to evoke is this sense of reality that causes the players to form real feelings and emotions about the characters and setting depicted in the game. This is no different for Playdead's macabre masterpiece LIMBO. The player controls a boy and helps him navigate the foreign terrain by solving puzzles and avoiding enemies. LIMBO has a powerful ability to have the players experience affect and emotion and this cultivates a feeling of understanding and connectedness to this brilliant work.

Massumi describes the difference between affect and emotion in his work "The Anatomy of Affect". In this article, he describes affect (the initial, visceral response people have to something) as "a suspension of action-reaction circuits and linear temporality."<sup>1</sup> As for emotion, the processed, refined feelings that linger with us, Massumi states that

[a]n emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning (Massumi 1995, p. 84).

This distinction is extremely powerful in video games where the player is meant to completely submerge themselves into the experience; the initial feelings about a gameplay event act as the affect it has on the players while the emotional response influences the long-term feelings about the experience by processing that affect. One experience I had while playing LIMBO where I really had a visceral reaction was when the boy pulls off the spider's last leg.

Example 1: Screenshot of the moment right before the spider's leg is pulled off in Playdead's LIMBO



<sup>1</sup> Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect" in *Cultural Critique*. number 31. Autumn 1995.

The scene depicted in the screenshot above happens just prior to the spider's leg being brutally pulled off. I could not get myself to get a picture of the leg in the process of being pulled off because I feel a tinge of discomfort every time I watch it. When I first saw this, I was extremely offput by the idea of pulling off the spider's leg. Sure, I did not want it to kill me, but I also did not want to cause it any further pain after it just lost its other legs. What made my feelings of offputness turn to disgust were the sounds that it made right after this.

Example 2: Audacity- rendered audio clip of the in-game moment when the spider's leg is pulled off in Playdead's LIMBO



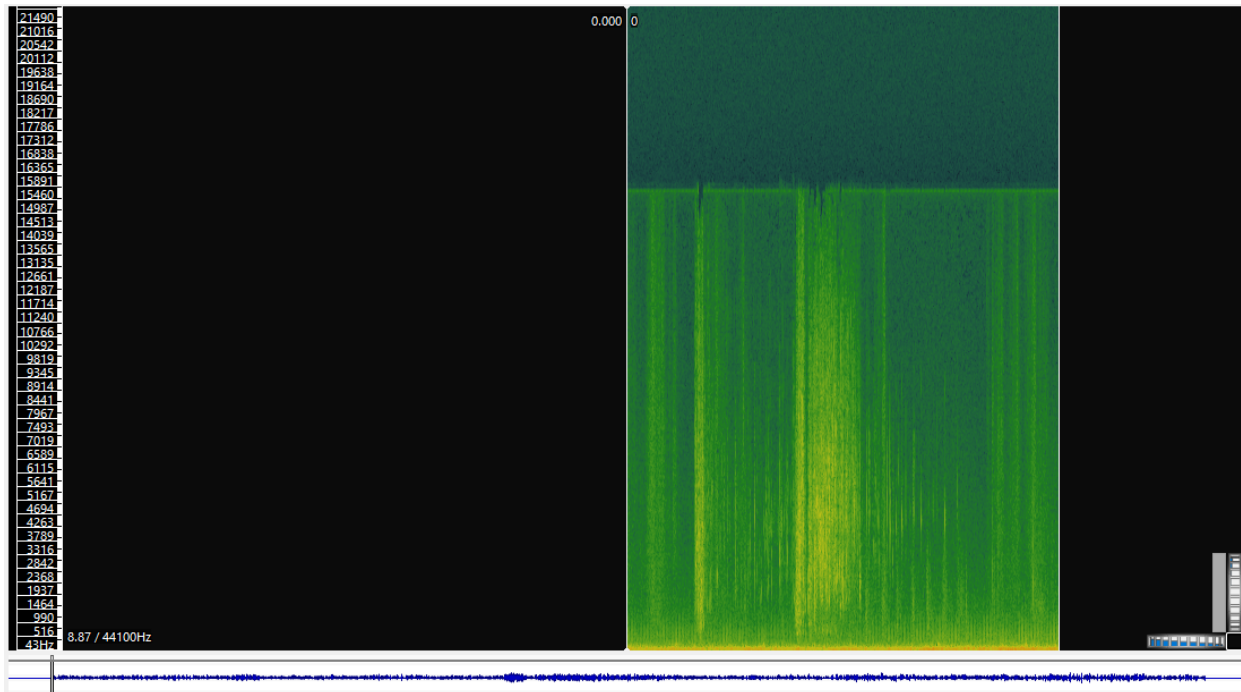
spiderdeath.wav

The developers at Playdead did a wonderful job picking the above sounds for this scene. It is absolutely gut-wrenching and discomfoting; it still gets me whenever I listen to it. When played, a low rumble akin to a kind of twisted purr can be heard in the background throughout. It reminds me of something that would be playing in a Saw movie. The purring is feels very ominous and its omnipresence throughout the scene makes it feel like something is watching me while I commit this treacherous act. The sounds of the spider leg being torn off is just as unnerving. It plays in two parts, the first the initial ripping, and the second the final blow. This two part experience is impactful because after hearing the first sound, I was sitting in agonizing suspense for what felt like quite a few seconds waiting for the job to be done. The second sound is the worst; it has all the ripping and squishing of the first sound, but with an added effect that makes it feel a viscous substance is pouring out of this wound and is getting everywhere. Both the ripping and the rumbling do a great job of making it sound like they are coming from my space and surrounding me. These details added for an 8 second scene make the game feel much more connected to the real world. This is an example of the Reality Effect, which Roland Barthes describes as when a creator adds extraneous details to a work that may seem to serve no narrative purpose but help ground the work further into reality.<sup>2</sup> These attributes that the game developers included make the game stick out to me; the sound design for this is amazing and does a great job at making me feel uncomfortable. These sounds are also quite interesting to look at in Sonic Visualizer, which can be shown in Example 3:

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect" in *The Rustle of Language* Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1984 (1968)).

Example 3: Screenshot of the audio from the scene where the spider's leg is taken off from Playdead's LIMBO as a spectrogram in Sonic Visualizer



In this screenshot from Sonic Visualizer, a spectrogram of both channels for the sounds that are played as the spider's leg is ripped off can be shown. The squishing and ripping can be seen in the spectrogram as the tall, bright yellow lines amidst the green. These are the very lines where I flinched instinctively when I first played through this section of the game. The first of these yellow lines is not as wide as the second, representing the initial and final rips that I mentioned above. The fact that the second yellow line is wider and therefore represents a longer sound also makes it feel heavier and linger longer; it feels like the sound is meant to sit with the player, as if to have them sit with the consequences of their actions. The low rumble can also be heard underneath the spider sounds, represented by the smaller, yellow-green lines at the bottom. This sound seems to be constant and uniform, like something is stalking me just beyond my field of vision. Though this is a short audio clip, it is very powerful in that it can elicit such strong reactions in this short time.

When I was initially playing through this section, I was appalled and grossed out by the sounds and visuals I experienced while having to rip off this poor spider's leg. I felt this disgust so intensely that I shut my eyes while I was playing without thinking. When I had my significant other play through the game last week, I found myself once again shutting my eyes and feeling a similar sense of being offput as the first time I played. However, when I was continuing forward in the game and even after when I had stopped playing for the day, the disgust I felt had faded into a lingering sadness. My appallment had turned to sorrow and regret; I felt bad that the spider was not only legless and defenseless, but now dead because of my actions. This sadness is the emotional response I had to my final encounter with the spider. I still feel grossed out by the scene when I rewatch it (like when I had to make the screenshot and audio clip for this), but

mostly when I think about that spider and its final moments, I just feel regretful and sad. This ability to evoke these strong reactions is a testament to the game developers' effort in making LIMBO. Not only were they able to make me feel disgusted by my initial encounter with this puzzle, but also left a lasting impact on me that I think about almost every time I think about the game. This spider was meant to be an antagonist and it never stopped trying to attack me even with one leg. Even though this spider was only in the first part of the game, it is still one of the things that has stuck with me the most and the feelings I had playing through this section have an important impact on how I view the game as a whole.