

MOMENTS IN LIMBO

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Moments in Limbo

Introduction

Limbo is a puzzle-platform game released in July 2010. Unlike other 2D scrollers, Limbo makes use of a colorless environment to evoke the feeling of dread and horror as a boy traverses a dangerous environment in search of his sister. Throughout the game there are many key moments that reach out to the player and their ability to overcome them, from large spiders to an empty, but functioning factory. Here we discuss a moment that really hit me, the game going against the trope in video games of having a partner.

Limbo's Memorable Moment

The moment in Limbo that was memorable for me is when the player sees other people for the first time, which instead of helping you, they try to inhibit your progress. It begins with the mechanical spider legs being controlled by a boy, and later you see that they have set booby traps for you and run whenever you get close. This made me feel a bit confused and hurt that this group of people is not trying to help the boy, but instead trying to inhibit his progress or kill him. Shortly after you use their booby traps against them you continue to progress like normal, never seeing another living person.



(Running into a dangerous group of boys)

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Reality vs Real Life

Jean Baudrillard defines the hyperreal as the indistinguishable conjunction of true reality and our simulation of reality. Although the entire game devotes itself to this idea like many other video game, the instant the boy sees the first member of the tribe the hyperreal gets solidified. No matter the experiences of individuals, when we come into this world we are not alone and the feeling of seeing someone for the first time can fill the player with a sense of relief. I felt that relief because this is a trope used in other video games, where a new character is introduced that has been watching you and you have to chase them down to eventually meet them.



(Meeting the first boy at the mechanical spider legs)

Following the Trail

With Limbo's lack of telling a narrated story the game highly relies on your past experiences of side scrollers, elementary math, or reading to keep moving forward or right.

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Combined with this, you are given the objective of following the boy. Louis Althusser coins the idea as interpellation or hailing in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace every day police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed’ (and not someone else) (Althusser).

Using Althusser’s example of a policeman calling you, you get the same experience from the boy running away from you even though it is nonverbal. The boy has said nothing to me, I began pursuing him, invigorated with a sense of purpose. Eventually I see him again with another and begin the chase again.

Immersing into Danger with Sound

Defining Immersion with Rogers

Immersion, when applied to the arts, can be defined as the suspension of disbelief or the expansion of the consciousness into areas of the unconscious. Ariel Rogers gives us three rules to define immersion:

[First,] This relationship is marked, first, by a relative scale. In order to accommodate plunging or embedding, the environment must be construed as larger than the object it is

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to encompass.... Second, the notion of immersion implies proximity. Bodies cannot become immersed in a substance or environment from a distance; there must be contact, or the prospect of contact, between a body and its environment.... Finally, the concept of immersion suggests a multidimensional relationship. To be immersed, a body must not only come into contact with a larger environment but be surrounded by it. (Rogers: 139)

Limbo makes good use of these rules throughout the entire game and combining it by suspending your own beliefs makes it easy to immerse yourself into the game. Since the main character is a child, you cannot enter fully as your adult self. This would break your immersion as the size of the environment differs depending on your age and as you grow up you forget what it's like to see at lower heights. Of course, you can always kneel but it's not the same because you're too large.

Secondly, the boy is always interacting with the environment. He walks, jumps, climbs, and swims throughout the game. Experiences shared by many through both childhood and adulthood. By doing these actions you become a part of the environment because every move we make impacts it in some form albeit a footprint or a disturbance of the flora.

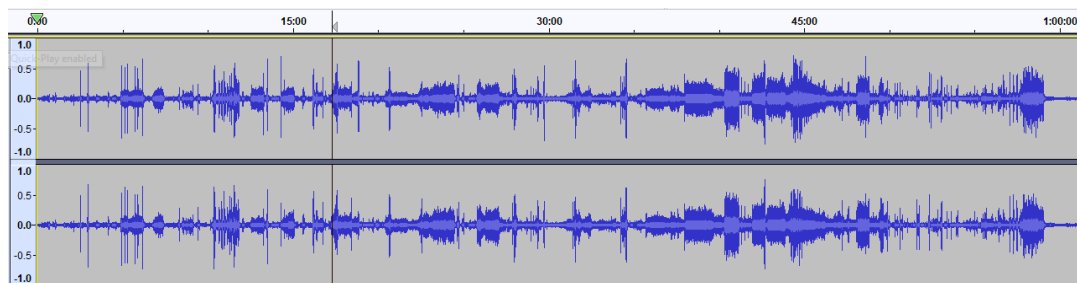
The game also makes use of the three grounds: foreground, midground and background, which many games do rarely or not at all. Immersion for a 2D side scroller is difficult because our reality is in 3D. Limbo is also in greyscale which can pull away from the immersion. However, with the use of all three grounds, immersion is easier as we and the boy are now surrounded by our environment on all sides. Another thing that supports the immersion in this game is the sounds. Limbo makes use of its soundtrack by not having any music in the way we might think, but instead creates its sounds with different categories of noises and those of the

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environment such as walking and traps closing. In addition to that it uses it to notify you of upcoming danger.

Limbo's Use of Sound

Didier Anzieu in his essay *The Sound Envelope* discuss the bath of sounds as an entity “with...[a] double surface, facing inwards and outwards, since this wrapping is made up of sounds emitted by both the... [player] and its environment (Anzieu: 184).” The player is immersed into this environment with the sound it produces and the sound it doesn't. One of these instances is during these moments of danger. In *Limbo* you will usually hear impending danger before you see it. One of the times that you don't is when you meet the entire ground at once and they start blowing darts at you.



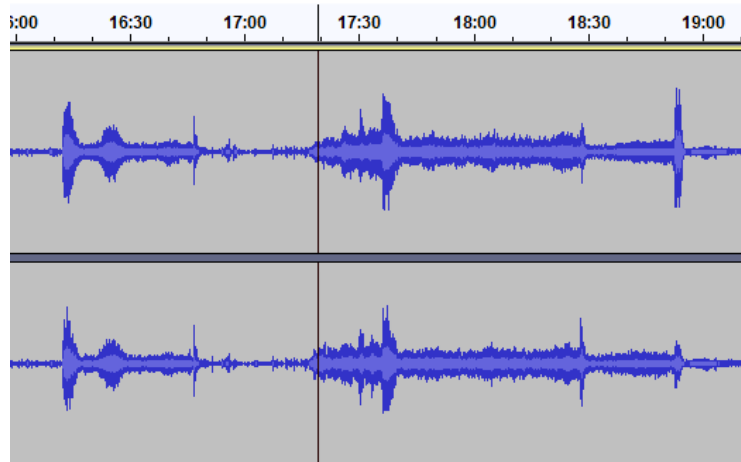
(Audio snippet showing the point at where you hear the darts blowing)

Pleasure Principle

At this moment, the game becomes void of any pleasure replacing it with a small amount of satisfaction and finds a good way to shock the players. Shock, or in this case Fright, is defined by Freud as the condition to which one is reduced if one encounters a danger without being prepared for it (Freud: 12). The player is not shocked by what the group uses to hurt you, but by

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the fact that it is humans like you that want to do so. Freud also states that if you succeed in the repression of your satisfaction your ego will identify it as unpleasure, which is exactly what you feel once you have realized that the group will no longer bother you; I felt satisfaction, but I was not pleased with the way I had to get it (Freud: 11).



(Audio snippet showing the point at which the tribe succumb to their deaths)

Reality Effect

By this point you've already killed the spider that was chasing you, and although the group's chase also ends in their demise, the game's soundtrack continues as normal. This is a good example of the reality effect. The story overall is about the challenges the boy faces, and by not having anything differ in the soundtrack to show that what you have done is of any importance indicates that they are not essential to the story. In Barthes', *The Rustle of Language*, this can be compared to concrete reality which is defined as insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, and redundant words (Barthes: 146). The death of this group does not aid in the plot that you create for the boy over his journey, therefore making them insignificant objects. This adds onto the environment by relying on the players' experience

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outside of the game. That experience can be a general one, where it can pull on the sadness evoked by disappointment, betrayal or just being hurt.

Conclusion

The game makes good use of its environment to make sure that the emotions you feel are real and not misplaced. This instance of the game really stuck out to me because you have no other choice. In most games that I play, I am the hero, but here I am not the hero nor am I the villain; I am just someone trying to make it. Limbo makes excellent use of this by having no one else in the game that you kill. You continue to learn from the puzzles and apply that knowledge to further yourself, just like you would in real life.

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