

Breaking Through the Glass

Jacob Arispe

Video Games : Behind the Screens

Dr. Schwarz

University of North Texas

Denton, TX

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Escaping From the Downward Spiral



The 'Beginning'

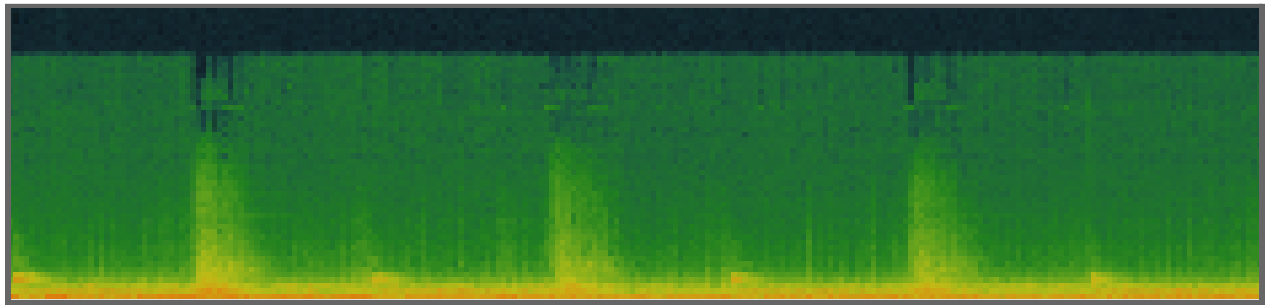
Caught within a realm of destruction and uncertainty, the kind of reality as projected through this macabre curtain of despair slowly unravels a heart shaped unlike any other. *LIMBO* for as simple as it appears on the surface, is a riveting experience from start to finish that encapsulates through use of experimental noise. Describing such, however, would be an understatement, as it is up to you (the player) to watch over and prevent any potential threat by taking advantage of environments and the sounds that they produce in means of guiding this nameless boy. You are an unseen guardian who has to use said environments, searching for the light that remains.

Though climbing out of the darkness is easier said than done, occasionally, you might be frustrated because of how frequent deaths occur. There is no need to be discouraged however, as even the defenseless are far more capable at surviving than so it seems. If there is anything that perfectly fits the unlikely hero image, it is this small-fearless protagonist. The overall objective is

to break away from this place, finding means of escaping everything that is out to harm the protagonist. It is unknown whether he is right where he belongs, or where exactly he came from and how he got here in the first place. Drenched with an ambient atmosphere, the figments that circulate this nightmarish-dream-like fantasy world are to be observed carefully - of which you can only control so much, being pulled deeper into this eerily-tranquil land. Help this boy on his journey towards finding the light.

The Affect of Music

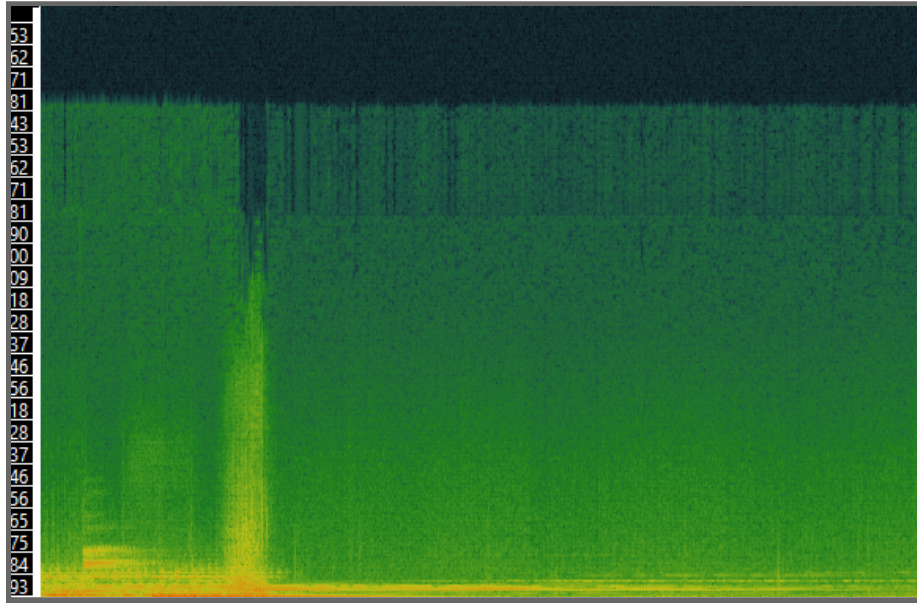
(Track 23: Up & Down)



Full spectrogram of five minute track (taken via Sonic Visualizer)

This rush of adrenaline fuels you inside-out. A gravitational force consisting of anxiety pulls and pushes your senses in endlessly-sporadic directions. Up and down the mind flings away. You are not far from helping this boy reach his destination, meanwhile the liquid-like pattern of a faucet echo beyond the foreground, as saw blades begin to emerge. This reverb-ed pattern of a string-like hum and droning quiver, grows progressively louder the tighter the level's environment becomes. Swinging from one section to another, avoiding these monstrous saw blades; here it is where said sounds continuously loop and continue to amplify, awaiting for you

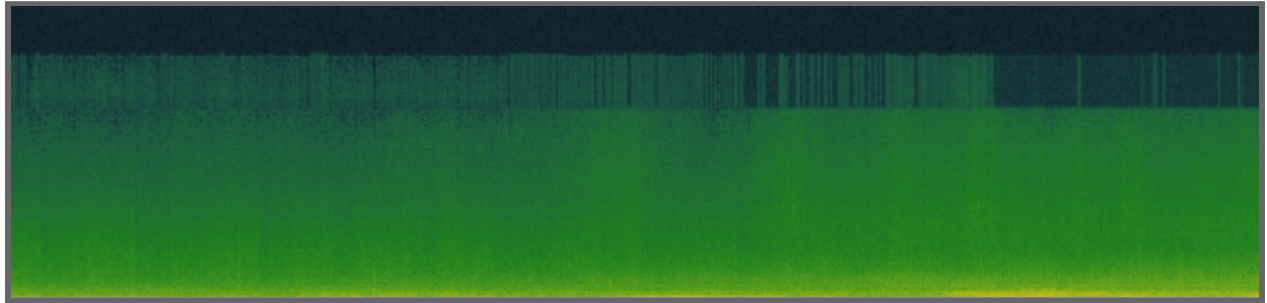
to make the final jump. Leaping to the otherside, all sounds revert and cut off the very moment that a wall of glass shatters into hundreds of pieces. Dead silence ensues.



Around the three minute-mark, all instrumentation abruptly cuts off.

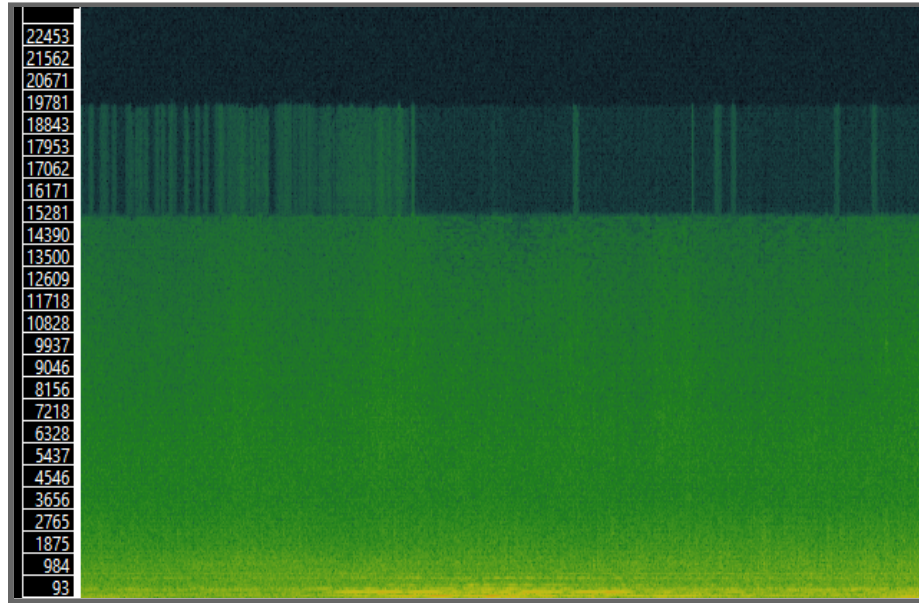
This is where breaking through the glass wall occurs.

The lonely string-like hum, fades as the boy lays flat on the ground. Sounds of nature dominate the atmosphere and after staring for nearly a minute, the boy rises just as he did from the very beginning of the game. He slowly climbs up a steep hill. Then he stops. An unknown girl is seen, kneeling in front of a mound of soil. Nearby appears to be a wooden swing. The boy attempts to reach forward, as the girl slowly sits up as if someone were really there. The game cuts to black and static noise begins to fizzle, still with nature harmonizing. A familiar sounding tune is heard once more, returning back from where you once were at the beginning. The buzzing of flies proliferate and soon drown into this endless-halcyon loop.

*The Emotion of Vitality**(Track 24: Credits)**Full spectrogram of two minute track*

It is without a doubt that Martin Stig Andersen ingeniously experimented with synchronized music to capture a moment as hard-hitting as the conclusion. The feeling of being pulled and pushed on a rope while the world loses its gravity is pure whiplash, regardless of how many times a player may have experienced playing a game like *LIMBO*. Having an acousmatic approach to music style and reapplying so through electronic capabilities, Andersen has masterfully created this uncanny bridge between two frames of reality. In addition to the fact that because of the broadly non-traditional aesthetic behind Andersen's music, its sound in a generalized perspective makes your head spin, just wondering what exactly he used as both a sonic and visual source. Even the boy for example being a perfect representation of minimalist design, expressions when represented, evoke immeasurable amounts of abstract-realism. Each and every sound is a meticulously-made fabrication used to deliberately remove all life from any moving object or thing, no matter its size (including a giant spider). This is what makes soundscapes in *LIMBO* indescribably remarkable. The fact that sounds of which were explicitly arranged and represented through visuals yet remain alien to the human ear, provoking feelings along the lines of fear, curiosity and astonishment. Having a distortion allowed the player to

interpret sounds rather than identify them; which is great when considering the fact that the game's art direction is entirely made up of silhouettes and shadowy imagery. Now that I think about it, this is why distortion (out of all music techniques) were emphasized when taking this course.



Around the one minute-mark, the same instrumental loop as heard from the game's introductory theme emerges.

Distortion, for as abstract as it is by default (and thanks to its associated history with experimental sound), constructs a sonic framework where a person (the player) could experience a sensation similar to looking at themselves in a double mirror. In Jean Baudrillard's sentiment on hyper-reality for instance, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential [experience of any kind] being [individual] or a substance [subject]. This is forward to meaning that such (whatever is considered physically untouchable) "-models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal". In correlation to the environmental presentation of a game like *LIMBO*, "[the circumstances] precedes the map [*sic.* Of reality], nor survives it." "-the map that precedes the

territory—precession of simulacra [also known as visual representation(s); which *LIMBO* is immensely built upon] —it is the map that engenders the territory [the game’s setting] and if we were to revive the fable today [adapt from it], it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map” [left to be forgotten and deemed as ‘irrelevant’ or ‘non-existent’ overtime, according to reality]. (*Baudrillard* 1983, 1-2).

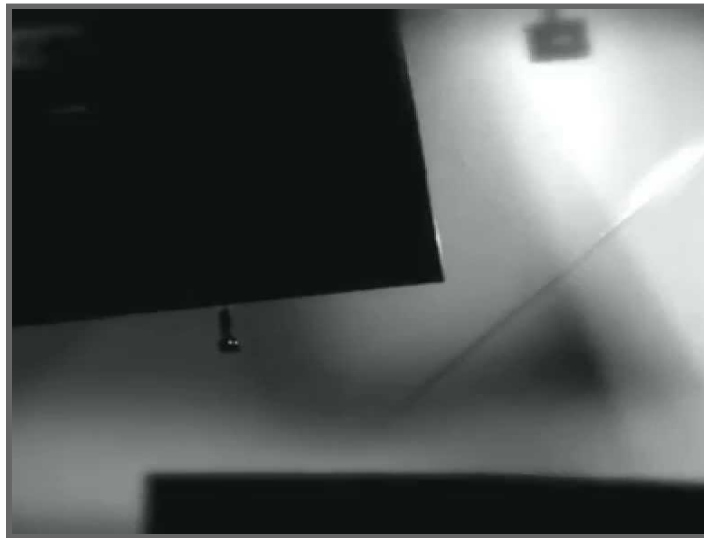
Now when contrasting bits of this concept to philosophies discussed by Brian Massumi; his principles on *Autonomy of Affect* show that ideas along the lines of ‘cognitive fulfillment’ and separation of identities interlinked between (perhaps) two realities, are nevertheless not meant to lean too heavily among one reality over the other. This could pose as trivial, especially when questioning unanswerable principles based on existence of vitality or atrophy alike and connecting the two towards something as subjective (let alone culturally distinguishable) as the concept of afterlife. Here, it is where we (the players) usually take a step back from the game, since the majority may not choose to complete it under spare time. Not having a moment to decompress can promote disillusionment of not just one reality, but realities of any form (e.g. the game’s reality). Being driven to reason or lack thereof can overwhelm and promote sensory overload if not careful. Sometimes what is seen and heard is better than what is said or done. Massumi further explores that views are not meant to be tied to singularity, even if seeming otherwise.

Views according to Massumi, are held inside this sphere of consciousness to the extent of shaping a “whole universe of affective potential -[with its elements of thought being] construed-whether [based on] past or future, inside or outside, transcendent or immanent, sublime or abject, atomized or continuous” (Massumi 1995, 105). As such also raises whether or not disillusionment has tangents of self-awareness towards the state of a reality before experiences come into effect.

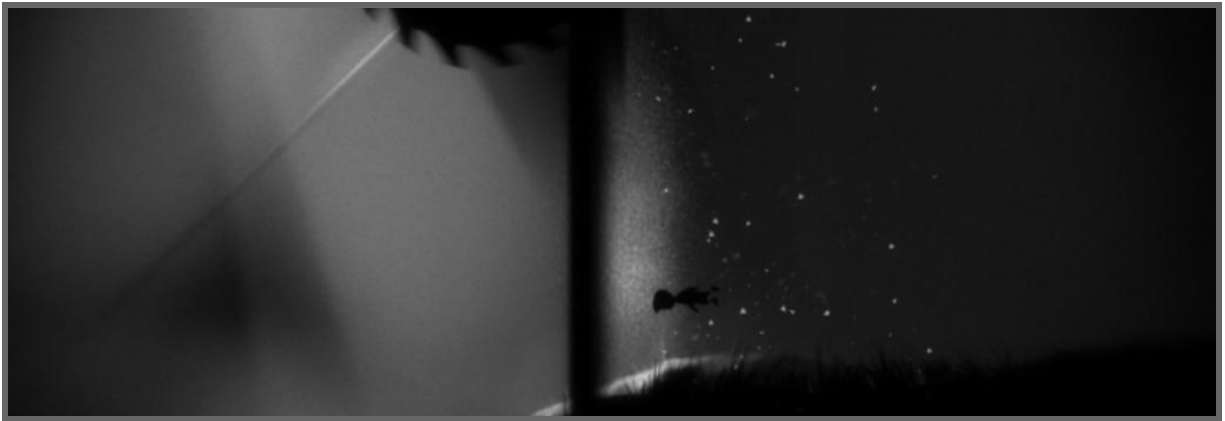
In speaking related to disillusionment and how it blurs lines between realities, especially when composed of richly-constructed soundscapes (like *LIMBO*), Didier Anzieu's approach on the phenomena is found in *The Skin Ego*, with a subsection aptly titled The Mirror of Sound. Sounds as a component to reality, are converted and treated as a reflection to experiences and events, of which are derived from sensations/emotions that we instinctively process based on memory. Once there is a sound that resonates with the conscious, it is automatically assigned an identity. Now taking away the familiarity of a particular sound, the mind is unable to associate the source, leaving the remainder of autonomy to be left with only an illusion of what exactly the sound could be (at least fit to our current physical reality). “-While listening to them [sounds] if it has been prepared by an environment that has immersed it early enough in a bath of sounds of the right quality and volume.” This means that at any age (notably infancy) humans are adaptive enough to craft and frame realities due to our senses and how much we absorb while being soaked in this figurative ‘bath of sounds’ (Anzieu 1989, 186). In extension to principles of sound being applied to reality and specifically adopting realism, Roland Barthes’ exploration on *The Reality Effect* detests that “irreducible residues of functional analysis have this in common: denoting [to what is known as] “concrete reality’ signifying that what is considered “[a] pure and simple ‘representation’ of the ‘real’ [shares a relation questioning among] “what is” (or has been) thus appears as. a resistance to meaning [within reality].” Barthes continues by specifying such qualities designed to be ‘disassembled’ (“insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words”, according to Barthes). (Barthes 1968, 145).

Reverting back to *LIMBO* and its structure on depicting reality through gameplay, the player is expected to make more than several mistakes. Soon they may eventually gain accustomization to remembering the kind of obstacles that the game has to offer. A boy awakens in this unknown land, with his primary goal being to survive and move forward by taking the risks that may lead to nothing more but nothingness itself. This is why as the player, we have the separate goal to keep the boy alive; if not at least ‘help him’ move forward by unraveling the heart hidden beneath a world full of danger, even if it means encountering suffering and what seems to be ‘inescapable’ hopelessness.

Additional Screenshots



Approaching the Final Jump



Impact



Breakthrough



Somewhere Familiar



The Beginning of an End

Sources

Baudrillard, Jean. "*The Simulacrum* " in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1983).

Massumi, B. "*Cultural Critique - The Autonomy of Affect*" No. 31, Autumn, 1995.

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

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