

## Affect and Emotion in Playdead's Limbo<sup>1</sup> Sarah Shultz, UNT Summer 2021

During my experience with Limbo over the last few weeks, I have been both disturbed and enthralled, frustrated and calm. Limbo is a shocking game in many ways, containing several hidden dark themes and questionable solutions to puzzles. Many scenes in the game come across as viscerally shocking and disturbing at first. However, I think this is part of the beauty of the game. The enchantment of Limbo can be made evident in the game's exploitation of Brian Massumi's theory of affect and emotion in puzzle solving.

When Massumi describes the relationship between affect and emotion, he uses affect to mean the body's gut, visceral response to an event, and he uses emotion to describe the way we process the affect of an event through language. In Massumi's words, "[a]ffects are *virtual synaesthetic perspectives* [sic] anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them,"<sup>2</sup> and "[e]motion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture—and of the fact that something has always and again escaped (Massumi: 96)." To me, this concept of affect and emotion is especially evident in one particular scene.

Example 1: screenshot of a scene in Limbo by Playdead



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<sup>1</sup> Limbo is a video game developed by Playdead about a young boy who wakes up in Limbo and must traverse the various obstacles in order to save his sister.

<sup>2</sup> Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect" in Cultural Critique. number 31. Autumn 1995, 96.

The screenshot above occurs several puzzles into the game, taken at about 16:14 from a full Limbo playthrough shared by one of my classmates<sup>3</sup>. One recurring obstacle in the game is water, and the boy apparently cannot swim. At this particular point, the boy comes across a pool of water with a few dead bodies floating atop the surface. There are no other objects that the boy can use to cross the water, and thus the only way for him to cross the water is to hop across the drowned bodies of the other boys. This is a moment in the game that I felt incredibly shocked by. While from an objective standpoint, there is nothing inherently wrong about using the objects at one's disposal in order to solve a problem, there is something viscerally unsettling about using a body as a bridge to cross over a pool of water. When I first came to this obstacle in the game, my initial reaction was to see if it was possible to swim through the pool without disturbing the bodies. Of course, that attempt was unsuccessful because it is built into the Limbo's logic that the little boy cannot swim. It was then that I realized what I had to do; the only way across the water was to use the dead bodies. My stomach sank at the thought, giving me a sort of sickening and sinking affect. But I quickly swallowed the rising queasiness, refusing to process the gut reaction, and hopped across the bodies, thus clearing the obstacle. It was only after having crossed the water that I was able to process the sickening feeling in my gut, translating the disturbed affect into words and emotion in my mind.

I wrote in my assignment from the first week of class that during the scene depicted in Example 1 that I was afraid of incurring the wrath of an in-game deity when I had to hop across bodies to cross the water. This fear of an Other sort of deity figure in the game is described in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison and Michael Foucault's critiques on the idea. The panopticon prison model includes a central watchtower that allows an inspector to have an unobstructed view of the entire prison. The watchtower is also visible from any location on the prison grounds, and yet it is designed in such a way that anyone looking into the watchtower cannot tell who is or is not inside. This way, the prisoners being inspected have no way of knowing if they specifically are being watched at any given time, and will "always feel themselves as if under inspection,"<sup>4</sup> and the inspector has the ability to "[see] *without being seen* [sic] (Bentham: 1)." We can describe Bentham's "inspector" in the panopticon as a sort of Other. In class discussions, Bentham's ideas were paraphrased in the idea of the Look and the Gaze, a Look being an actual exchange of glances, and a Gaze being an internalized look—the feeling of being watched. The panopticon used this idea by making the prisoners feel as though they were constantly under the Gaze of the Other (the inspector)—as if they were always being watched—even if the inspector was not watching them specifically in the moment. In my assignment from the first week of class, I wrote that the lack of consequences from the little boys actions of hopping across the bodies could point to a sort of absence of an Other figure in the game, but upon analyzing the audio from the scene that I chose, I discovered something much deeper.

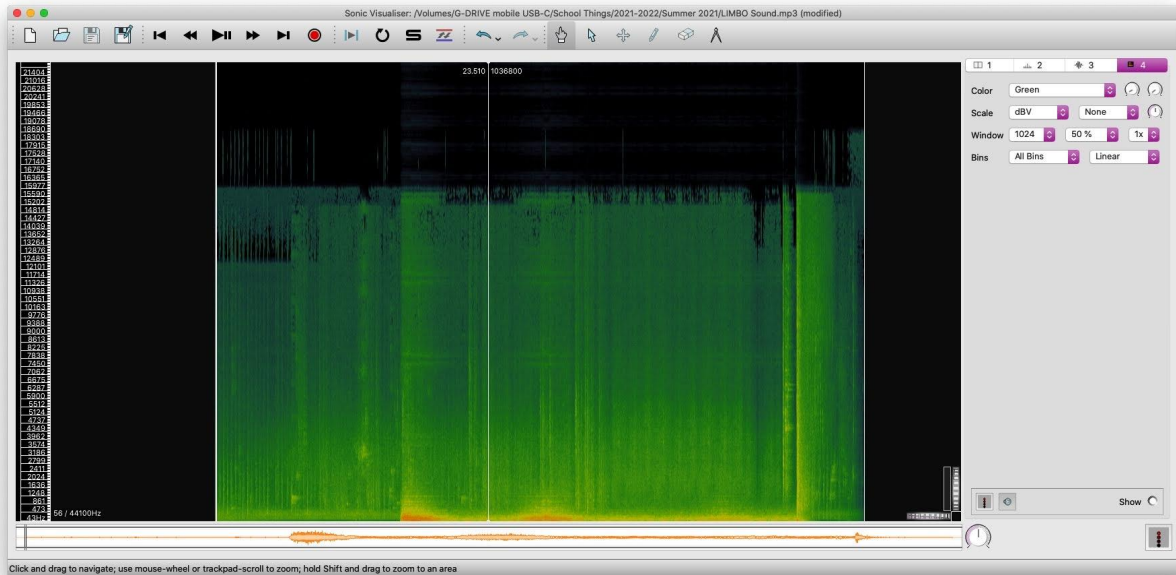
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<sup>3</sup> Bolloxed (2015) *LIMBO - Full Game Walkthrough [NO Deaths]*. 26 February. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ie19\\_GXAAw&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ie19_GXAAw&t=2s) (Accessed: 21 May 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Bentham. "Letter V. Essential Points of the Plan" in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843). 11 vols. Vol. 4, 2.

Example 2: [Audacity-rendered sound clip of the scene shown in Example 1 from Limbo by Playdead \(00:15:57-00:16:53\)](#)

Example 3: Sonic image of the above sound clip



As seen from the Example 3, there is some background noise that remains constant throughout the entire audio cut from 15:57 to 16:53, which is a sort of cave ambience. However, right at the moment shown in Example 1, when the little boy hops onto the first dead body, a deep, low drone appears in the background. This low drone is depicted by the orange band that suddenly appears at the bottom of the image in Example 3 and then continues to rise and fall before dropping out entirely near the end of the audio clip. In a class discussion last week (20 May 2021) when Dr. Schwarz was showing the class how to load an Audacity clip into Sonic Visualizer and analyze it, he discovered a similar low drone (represented by an orange band) in the clip that he chose. Dr. Schwarz described that low drone as representing the Gaze of the Other, which brings with it the spooky feeling of always being watched. In that moment in the game when the boy hops onto the first body, the appearance of the deep drone strengthened the sinking affect of that action, making me feel as though the game somehow knew what I had done. The drone finally disappeared altogether after the little boy drags one of the drowned bodies out of the water to spring a trap, which allows him to walk across unharmed.

While Dr. Schwarz described the low drone as representative of the Gaze of the Other, I also think that the drone could represent the little boy's fear of an Other. The drone is absent for the first few seconds of the audio clip, which occur shortly after the boy defeats the spider that has been terrorizing him for the first quarter of the game. The boy is feeling confident and unafraid of what any Other, if there even is one present. So far, the boy has done nothing of consequence (besides venturing farther into Limbo than anyone ever wanted him to). If there is

an Other, perhaps the Other did not think the boy would go so far as to use bodies to cross the water and save his sister, and thus was no longer worried about him. However, when the boy did hop onto one of the bodies for the first time, the drone strikes in, loud and clear, before it fades to rise and fall in the background. The music itself is sudden and spooky, perhaps to reflect the boy's heightened fear of consequences and being watched. Perhaps the boy is taunting the Other. Perhaps the drone reflects the Other's sudden shock and the fixing of their Gaze on the boy when they realize that he will not be stopped. The drone then stays in place for about forty-five seconds—perhaps to reflect the boy's ebbing fear—until the little boy uses one of the bodies to spring a trap so that he can make it across unharmed. After the crash of the trap and the crunch of the body underneath, the drone disappears for the time being. If the boy has been fearing an Other this whole time, perhaps he has shaken off his fear, convincing himself that he has done nothing wrong and that there is nothing that he can be punished for. The boy quells his fear of being watched, deciding that he no longer has anything to worry about.

To relate all of this back to Massumi's distinction between emotion and affect, as I mentioned earlier in the paper, once I figured out what I had to do to continue in the game, it took me a few seconds to process it. I have described how the actions of the scene have affected me, and the sound track of the scene only enhanced the affect. As I mentioned, I initially felt queasy when I realized that I had to use the bodies to hop across the water, but when I heard the drone come in, I felt my heart stop for a split second. I was numb to any emotion. I shook off any physical reaction and proceeded to cross the water, but once I had made it across and the drone still lingered, I began to realize that I was afraid and disgusted with myself (or the boy) for using the dead bodies of other boys in such a way. I was convinced that I had incurred the wrath of the Other within the game. And surprisingly, as it was depicted in the music with the drone disappearing after using the body to spring the trap, I slowly came to accept the horror of using dead bodies in the game. While the crunch of the body beneath the trap did cause me to cringe and begin to feel sick (an affect that was processed into an emotion by a disgusted exclamation shortly after), I began to assure myself that using dead bodies was a function of the game and that it really didn't matter since it was just a game, after all.

Part of Massumi's theory of affect and emotion is that because of the nature of affect and emotion, we can experience a sensation (the affect) before we even have time to judge a reaction to it (the emotion) (Massumi: 89). In my experience with *Limbo*, I felt this to be true. During the scene depicted in Example 1, I felt a wave of physical affects that took the entire rest of the day and into the next to fully process them into emotion and to discern what I thought about it. What Massumi says about emotion and affect is true: the physical urge to cry or cringe or vomit or laugh overtakes you, even before you know how you really feel.