

The Reality Effect as Challenge in LIMBO

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MUAG 4200

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06/28/2021

The puzzle-platform video game LIMBO, developed by independent studio Playdead, consists of an array of esthetics that aid a player's investment within the mechanics of the gameplay and their connection with the main character. The entirety of LIMBO is absent of any dialogue or direct forms of communication between characters; instead, the game heavily relies on visual and sonic effects in order to communicate events to the audience and uphold a natural progression of the game. The developers created a strategic environment that both a) grounded the simulated reality in "natural" occurrences and b) presented puzzles that implemented the environment for the player to actively (and other times, passively) progress through the game.

At the beginning of LIMBO, the young boy encounters a giant spider which becomes the first protagonist of the game. The first ten minutes of gameplay consists of the player fleeing from the giant spider all while puzzles and traps are presented which themes correlate to the present danger; these obstacles include spider webs, spider legs, caves, and rolling boulders. Towards the end of the chase (when the threat of a giant spider is minimized), the player encounters a set of mechanical spider legs that was created in attempt to startle the audience (Bolloxed 10:48); this encounter signifies an abstraction from the players internal understanding of the environment and cohesively relates to a past danger (implementing the effect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). The beginning sequences of LIMBO include natural phenomenon that is easily understandable to the audience: the environment of the player is implied to be a forest, trees are able to fall and harm an individual, ropes hang from trees (implying they were tied there and not naturally grown), ropes are climbable, bear traps are present (implying hunting takes place within the environment).

As the game progresses, more mechanical/technological events take place, including boulders swinging from rope; these events allude to the idea that some primordial being (or

community) also occupies the forest with you. The moment in LIMBO when the player encounters the mechanical spider arms implies that there is something present that is capable of understanding their own environment and technologically intuitive to replicate events as a form of defense. During this brief conclusion, the player progresses a couple motions forward to have all curiosity of the circumstance satisfied by finding another human operating the mechanical arms (who also abruptly flees afterwards). This moment within LIMBO becomes the first pivoting point where the scenery/environment changes, and new forms of danger is presented.



Figure 1: Screenshot from LIMBO – mechanical spider arms

This specific encounter contains visual cues of ropes attached to the legs, holes at the joints (implying bolts), and a platform further ahead. These all imply that this spider is not real.

The player's understanding of the game's environment slightly shifts to fit the concept of a forest-dwelling, technologically savvy tribe in context with their surroundings. Roland Barthes perfectly explains the fulfillment a change of scenery has towards the progression of a story;

according to Barthes, realism is secondary to the audience/players experience and the understanding of the literature's "reality" being canonical. "...[D]escription is constrained by no realism; its truth is unimportant (or even its verisimilitude)." (Barthes 144) Roland Barthes was describing the multitude of description in paintings from the Middle Age, implying that there was "no hesitation to put lions or olive trees in a northern country" and "only the constraint of the descriptive genre" mattered to these painters (Barthes 144). The designer's imagery becomes a collage navigated by the audiences' understanding.

LIMBO is full of moments that give the player discernment towards their own understanding of the game and how their role fits within their own progression through each scene/stage. By using specifically paced events throughout the storyline, the developers created a cohesive narrative that implements moments of subtle abstraction causes a shift in a player's understanding of their environment; this implication, in return, gives the game a cohesive progression that is engaging for the audience.

Work Cited

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

[Bolloxed]. (2015, Feb 15). *LIMBO – Full Game Walkthrough [NO Deaths]*. Youtube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ie19_GXAAw