MDA Analysis- Limbo

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Meaning of Limbo

The meaning of limbo can be drawn down to a place or state between heaven and hell (between good and evil). Limbo is a platform puzzler. The players are placed in a world without context and are given control of an unnamed boy. Controlling the boy through the world filled with dangerous obstacles and various environments, each introducing the player to environmentally based puzzles. Throughout the game there is no narrative dialogue, leaving the player exposed to the ambiguity of the story, giving them freedom to interpret it in anyway. In this report we will discuss the mechanics and how these environments allow the player to develop and use different dynamics to solve the puzzles. While also solving these puzzles, we will also discuss how these puzzles and environments allow the players to interpret the story and the meaning of Limbo through the different aesthetics experienced and witnessed throughout the game. To do this well will be looking towards the communication and level design aspects of the game.

Mechanics of limbo

Limbo has a very minimalistic design aspect in almost every area of the game, ranging from menu systems to art, this includes the game mechanics. The mechanics used throughout the game are the traditional platformer mechanics: move and jump, with the addition of a grabbing function (instead of attack). As stated before the design revolves around minimalism, and therefore most traditional elements are ignored, this includes tutorials and any form of explanatory text. This design method and approach therefore gives rise to two of the games key elements: 1. Learn Through death (experimentation and exploration), 2. Ambiguity.

When considering these two elements, players learn mechanics through them. With the aid of communication and level design. When looking at how the game begins, we are placed in a dark, gloomy area, with the silhouette of a boy seen on the ground. To move, the player is not told how or when to do so. Players instinctively begin to tap random buttons and once the appropriate ones have been taped, the player will immediately receive feedback. This teaches players how to move and jump. The grabbing mechanic on the other hand is not as obvious to the player as there is nothing to grab, this leaves complications for future areas as players are still unaware of this mechanic. What players experience here, is how the game teaches players to solve problems, and that is through exploration and experimentation. When considering the level design, players are situated in a safe environment that allows to them to test learn and become comfortable with the mechanics.

As the player progresses, they come across the first challenge, the jump. Although straight forward, players do not realise that this simple challenge lays the foundation of the main dynamics used throughout the game:

1. Momentum- speed and motion of the player before jumping can help increase the distance of the jump.
2. Precision and Timing- point of launch determines the point of landing.
3. Tap and Hold Delay- how far or high the player will jump.

If the player fails to use any of these dynamics, they will fail indefinitely, although this is likely improbable as players (especially seasoned players) experience the use of these dynamics instinctively. This design choice does make the mechanics easy to learn and understand.

Dynamics of limbo

When considering the mechanics of limbo, the level design and communication design, we observe how they are all used to solves puzzles throughout the game. The three basic interactions given to the player are used to develop dynamics around these two design aspects. The development of these mechanics into dynamics can be seen as a shift between learning through failure (key element 1) to puzzles solving. The level design present from the beginning of the game allows this shift to gradually occur. Let us take a look at the beginning of the game once more.

In the first 10 minutes, players are placed in a safe environment, serving as the best ground for a tutorial, allowing players to test out, learn and experience this shift at a low level. To elaborate further on this:

The player sees the silhouette of character (unnamed boy) laying on the ground. Through interacting with the control, players will receive feedback through the communication design as the boy opens his eyes and stands up. Thus, the first indirect challenge has been solved. Players learn trough exploration and experimentation before solving how the game is played.

The next area of dynamics is experienced when the player discovers the third mechanic, grabbing. As I have stated before this mechanic was not obvious. After making the first jump challenge players a trapped in a very small area with a ledge that is impossible to reach. When attempting and finally realising that the previous dynamics learn are not useful, player a left feeling stranded. Although being place in that small area makes it easier for players to notice a cart. On closer inspection, players will eventually notice how the character behave when they are close to the cart, as an animation of the character reaching out his hands is played. This hints at the possibility of grabbing, and once again the players need to discover this mechanic without a tutorial. The player now aware of this mechanic, learns a new dynamic of object pushing and pulling and how to use objects to their advantage (alongside this, players learn that can grab ropes and swing).

With further progression the player comes cross a large body of water and a boat. In previous challenges the player has already learn that water is bad for them. With the boat placed there, players realise they can use this object to make their way across the water. Teaching players to not only use object to their advantage but also how to avoid the dangers of the world. Once the players reach land, they are once again faced with a ledge they cannot reach. After a few observations players will see that they can pull the boat just as they did with the cart. This area teaches players that objects have multiple purposes and that players should always keep an open mind.

Puzzles become more conventional and abstract as player progresses. These puzzles create complex problems that obstruct the player. Although, looking back at the minimalistic design aspect, these complex problems are balanced out by the simple elements used to solve them. With these base dynamics laid down as a foundation, and the level design present in the game, it allows players to gradually grow dynamically, preparing them for the dangers ahead.

The Aesthetic Limbo

Due to the minimalistic design and the element of ambiguity surrounding Limbo, this section explores the vague and yet broad narrative aspect of limbo, the emotions evoked and how the communication design aspect creates and places emphasis on them. When analysing the narrative aspect, we will investigate two different theories behind the story of Limbo.

The Journey of the Human Race.

This idea revolves around the boy as a symbol of the human race. When the game begins, we see the boy surrounded by trees, with in dark and eerie setting. Everything from this area create a vague atmosphere, from the art to the player is vague, as we only have shapes to distinguish these objects from each other. This area being the beginning is where the boy learns the basic mechanics and dynamics and can be seen as the start of mankind's journey. When we progress through this forest, players come

across the first challenge that create a sense of fear, the Spider. The spider is a very important element that sets the key aspect of this specific narrative. The player when facing this challenged see the spider and attempt to pass it, although they will fail at this. Passing the challenge requires players to pay attention to detail and sound. Every time the spider stomps the ground a metallic sound is triggered. This first of all sparks a sense of curiosity in the player. On further inspection players will see that a bear trap falls from a tree. Using this trap to catch the spiders' legs and injure it in order to progress. Once this challenge has been passed the player has a sense of satisfaction, as they feel they have conquered their fear. Moving further into the area we come across some chopped trees, immediately we can see the effective change in the environment. From a stage covered with the shapes of trees to shapes of chopped trees. This hints at the first advancement of humanity. Below is some of the key elements we witness and in chronological order.

Event	Meaning
Boy wakes up in woods	Beginning of mankind Dynamics are simple
First spider encounter	Creating a sense of fear, hinting at the other dangers that we will encounter. Learning to use dynamics to solve problems and conquering our fear
Deforested area	First change in environment, first hint of the advancement of humanity
Mechanical spider	The players come across another spider, although this time it is controlled by someone. This indicates that humanity has not learned to use their fears and the dangers of this world to aid them
The wheel, spears and fire	As the player goes through, we see that there are other humans in this world, although they are hostile against the unnamed boy. The wheel, spear and fire once again hint that humanity is growing in terms of technology although humanity is still in their primitive ages
Treehouse village	Humanity is forming groups and working together to build a society of some sort.
Industrial Revolution	We come across an area filled with gears and other mechanical elements. Humanity has entered a more civilised age.
Electricity and the Hotel sign	We see that electricity now exists; the hotel sign spins off from this birth of electricity. Humanity is starting to use the earth's resources; thus, the hotel sign could mean that our time here is short and that we are only temporary inhabitants of earth.
Magnetism	Eventually humanity will surpass their current technological advances., leading to the last event.
Ending (breaking through the glass), graves.	We see the boy breaking through glass hinting at the fact that humanity will enter an age that will result in their death. The graves and flies we see, could mean that in the end we will end up right where our journey begin, we started from and will return to nature.

Throughout the game we come across white slugs that control the players movements, leaving the player only with the jump mechanic at their hands. These slugs could represent the things we can not control through our lifetimes, and in the end, we should just allow somethings to take their course and leave it all in the hands of the universe.

The Life of an Unnamed Boy

This section of the narrative mainly focuses on the emotional aspect of the aesthetic. As the unnamed boy, players make their way through this world of limbo experience dark emotions like fear, loneliness, sadness and unsettledness. These emotions are all experienced through the aid of the communication design aspect of the game, from art to sound. The art revolves around the idea of German expressionism,

an art form that focusses of emotion and makes use of the simple shapes. The art form visualizes and expresses the depressive and nightmarish events that the world has witnessed. Thus, fitting the tone and atmosphere the game creates. Most of the dangers the boy encounters are seen as fears or traumatic events that the boy has faced through his lifetime. From the spider evoking fear to the other boys trying to hurt him and avoid him shows the boy being bullied and how he has always been alone. Leaving players asking question the boy would probably ask, like:" Why do they want to hurt me, is it because I am different, because I have eyes and better hair?". The game preys on our childhood fears and depicts how we are treated by society for being unique through these events and is further amplified by the communication design through sound. As sound switches constantly as the players encounters new dangers, moving from a soft and low tone to a load and ominous noise. Limbo creates these emotions, reminding players of what their past, but also limbo forces the players to face them, resulting in a feeling of great satisfaction. Although this positive feeling is short lives, because just as we experience in real life, the world of limbo is unforgiving, and the player can never know what lies ahead, once again creating the sense of fear and isolation. This creates a unique relationship between the tension build up and the relief experience throughout the game, and we will see how this relationship affects the ending of the game. When the boy reaches the end of the game, after facing all their fears, there is this moment of breaking through the glass, the moment one escapes Limbo, this place filled with mix emotions of good and bad. In the end see the player dies, and the last emotion the player experiences is relief, hinting at the fact that the only escape from the fear of this world is death!

Escaping the Limbo (Conclusion)

The minimalism design continues to add onto the feeling of isolation, as no UI is present, and the player does not receive any form of direct communication from the designer. Although this does place more emphasis on the events of the games as little story is told through communication and rather through the events, placing an even greater meaning on them. The minimalistic design of the mechanics makes the game easy to learn and play, although, the puzzles of the game are complex at first, before analysing the simple elements they are built around. This hints at how life makes things seem more difficult than what they really are, clearly displaying a human's habit of over complicating simple situations.

Learning while dying places emphasis on the idea of death. Death fits this the theme and atmosphere of the game perfectly. First of all, when players die, players are not discouraged by any form of punishment, reducing the sense of frustration the player might experience. Another aspect that decreases frustration, the having no repetition between the puzzles, each puzzle is unique, allowing players to grow dynamically, and remain interested in the game. This also shows how the human race has grown through the player's growth of dynamic skills. Another theme this bring up is being stuck between a state of life and death further emphasising on the idea of Limbo. Players find themselves in a world where they have to face their fears and if they are not capable of doing so, they will remain in limbo.

Finally, the narrative of the game is mainly told through the mechanics and events of the game. The puzzles of the game serve no purpose on the narrative, leaving an even bigger hold of ambiguity and players still having no solid answers.

In the end players are left with one main lesson: The player is my enemy and my friend.

References:

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