

How Limbo Changed My Life

I came into gaming organically. Our family wasn't the frontrunners when it came to electronics, but we definitely have a history of games in the house. Not as far back as Pong, but we all played Frogger in the arcade and brought our first Intellivision II unit home before most other families on our block. I remember yelling at the malevolent sausages and eggs while playing BurgerTime and gaining agility while playing Tron with the small, metal disc, progenitor of the joystick, on the controller. My mother initially thought the games were a waste of time, but in a surprising turn of events, we were all shamed when she became our family's Tron champion, not only making it to the final level, but also defeating the Recognizer. Later, after a flirtation with computer games on our Commodore 64, we defected to ColecoVision and its rudimentary joystick. Then our family upgraded to Nintendo and we spent a summer concerned about saving a certain princess. By the time the first Game Boy came into our home, everyone threw around Tetris dueling challenges on an hourly basis. We ended up with three. Only my father escaped an addiction to playing. I even had, and still have, a handheld game of Hangman that uses words like majordomo and effete, that I used to take on road trips. Then as I got older, contemplating becoming a mature, functioning member of society and I was told I was supposed to stop playing video games. And I did. Briefly.

Then in the fall of 2010, I hung out with my best friend whose gaming dedication requires that he take a vacation day every time a new version of Halo is released. He introduced me to a Danish game called Limbo.

The Danes have given us many great things: Vikings, the writer, Hans Christian Andersen, and the actor, Mads Mikkelsen. But nothing they have done so far is as great of an accomplishment as Limbo. On the surface, it doesn't seem all that exciting. When you are explaining it to someone for the first time, perhaps they won't be as excited as they would be about killing the mutants in BioShock or cutting off a Necromorph's arm in Dead Space. Limbo is deceptively simple. Black and white, backdrop filled with shadows and harsh angles, and a little boy who can only perform four actions that is put in your care and dies repeatedly. But it is addictive.

Some may mistake Limbo as a simple game. The developers have, to paraphrase Einstein, "made things as simple as possible, but no simpler". Then when you start to play, you quickly realize the limitations of the game are what make it unique. Once you get over the hilarity of making your little boy hop up and down and enjoy the details of his hair flopping, blank expression and anticipation of what is to come, you also realize there is only one way to go - forward. And then he is immediately killed by something lurking on the landscape. But level-by-level, as you approach each new scene with an eye honed for lurking monsters or bear traps, you get eviscerated less and less and get a little smarter. The little boy goes from being a pawn to being someone you want to take care of and you feel a little bit guilty when he drowns or falls to his death or gets eaten by an enormous, unexpected spider. As you hop, walk forwards, walk backwards and pull items through the levels it gets more and more difficult to keep that little boy alive. But you do.

The first time I played Limbo, I played for an embarrassing number of hours. My learning curve was not very steep. The little boy hopped to his death repeatedly on each level. Eventually, I was booted from the game and told to go home. So I went out and bought an X Box 360 and I have not looked back. I thought that with my nerd glasses, my love of books, and dream of owning a full set of the O.E.D., that me also talking about video games would be just too much for most people to handle. But now I don't care. And I still kill that little boy on a regular basis.