

The Mythology of the Afterlife in *Limbo* and *Journey*

Interpretations of an afterlife abound in most religious traditions. It is a universal experience to be curious about what happens when we die and answers to this question have been addressed by the religious and areligious alike. *Limbo* and *Journey* both subtly rely on theological and religious aesthetics to explore the idea of an afterlife throughout their stories deliberately leaving room for interpretation and creating a more personal experience.

Limbo was published and developed by Playdead and Microsoft Game Studios on the X360 in 2010.¹ Its story focuses on what appears to be a young boy as he travels through a forest and factory setting as dangerous traps, creatures, and people block his path and leave him struggling his way through a dark world. Interestingly, neither piece uses dialogue or text to tell the story and relies entirely on the environment and visuals. *Journey* was published by Sony Computer Entertainment for the Playstation in 2012 and Annapurna Interactive on PC and iOS in 2019 and developed by Thatgamecompany and Santa Monica Studio.² In it, the player navigates the avatar through the ruins of a middle eastern themed environment toward a glowing light atop a mountain as it learns the story of the world through meditating and interacting with god-like figures. While *Limbo*'s story and aesthetic generally dark and full of obstacles as you travel through the environment unaided and *Journey* focuses on moving forward through a landscape assisted by higher beings and learning about the world you a travelling through, both pieces use the concept of journeying through a world between life and death to explore what it means to move forward and, ultimately, move on.

The very title of *Limbo* implies that the character is travelling through the edge of heaven in a between place that is not part of earth, heaven, or hell³. The term "limbo" in Roman Catholicism refers to the place where, until 2007, unbaptized infants, embryos, and fetuses remained after death⁴. Christianity, and especially Catholicism, believes in the concept of "original sin" which needs to be cleansed by baptism. Original sin stems from the belief that all humans tainted with Eve's original sin as "she would become the mother of all the living"⁵ after disobeying the Abrahamic god and eating the forbidden fruit. It also believes that nothing impure can enter heaven without first being cleansed.⁶ Thus, it is possible to interpret that the avatar in *Limbo* as a representation of an unbaptized infant who is forever trapped on the edges of heaven and hell. In this interpretation, it is likely that a child is used as an avatar rather than an infant for game design and story reasons. It is likely that navigating an infant through representations of real-world places and dangers would be jarring for players as it is too outside the realm of relatability. A young character allows the player to more easily empathize with (and

¹ Limbo

² Journey

³ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/limbo.htm>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-limbo-idUSL2028721620070420>

⁵ Genesis

⁶ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/limbo.htm>

realistically move) the character through the environment while still representing the societal perception of innocence placed on the very young.

Alternatively, it is possible that the name *Limbo* is used interchangeably with Roman Catholic purgatory. While this is not a truly accurate representation of the doctrine, it is a widely held belief that purgatory and limbo are the same place as they hold similar functions within religious mythology. Purgatory is available to all people after death. It is a place where people who were righteous in life, but still not pure enough to enter heaven wait until they can be cleansed of their sins or impurities. One interpretation is that the soul must be sanctified before it can enter heaven and that sanctification involves suffering.⁷ The New Testament book *Romans* notes that “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”⁸ As the player navigates the avatar through *Limbo* the character suffers and dies repeatedly as he puzzles through a number of traps. The progression is hindered throughout with no assistance, guidance and with almost a gleeful determination to see the avatar die as often as possible. Like its black and white aesthetic, *Limbo*'s world and gameplay are dark and full of suffering.

Either of these interpretations, however, are just that. *Limbo* is deliberately vague and generally without a driving plot. The game draws from familiarity of the popular concept of limbo (and its confusion with purgatory) among a Western audience to allow for an atmospheric story with a narrative that explains why this child character continuously suffers and dies as the player attempts to solve the game's puzzles. The only evidence of a higher being is potentially the ease of resurrection and presence of a light in the otherwise dark world. Unfortunately, any time the avatar begins to approach this light, a game mechanic sends him in the opposite direction against the player's will.

This mechanic is nowhere to be found in *Journey*.

⁷ <https://www.catholic.com/tract/purgatory>

⁸ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+5&version=NIV#en-NIV-28051>