

Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2020

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Game Title: *Portal 2*

Platform: PC, PlayStation, Xbox

Genre: FPS, Puzzle

Release Date: April 19, 2011

Developer: *Valve*

Publisher: *Valve*

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: *Eric Wolpaw* (Lead writer), *Jay Pinkerton* (Single player mode writer)

Overview

Portal 2 is a first-person shooter puzzle game set in *Aperture Laboratories* – an abandoned science and research facility. In the game the player plays as *Chell* – a tester for a product of the company: **the portal gun** – a device meant to shoot two portals that let objects move freely between them. We control Chell on her journey out of the laboratories while avoiding the dangers she encounters.

After a short exposition and basic control tutorial, we start our journey through the facility, aiming to exit from the surface level. However, we are dragged downward into the bottom of the building by Chell's foes. On that journey we are being exposed to the secrets and the past of the laboratories, the key characters who helped develop it, and its downfall at the end.

Portal 2 excels in the ways it provokes strong emotions from its players toward the events and the characters of the game. With smartly chosen settings, carefully written dialog, and other techniques and manipulations, the game feels alive and the player can truly feel part of the occurrences taking place.

Characters

- **Chell** – (The Hero) – The player's avatar; she is the daughter of two former workers at Aperture Laboratories. After a series of disasters happened during a company event ("*Bring Your Daughter to Work Day*") she ends up trapped in the facility as a tester for a product of the laboratories (the portal gun). Other than that, nothing else is known about Chell, except for the fact that she is mute

through the entire game (which is unclear if caused by brain damage or due to the simple fact that she's got nothing to say). What motivates Chell's actions throughout the game is a basic need to survive and thus escaping the facility. Chell doesn't show any signs of a character arc, change, revelation, making her a very flat character (which is not uncommon to similar action characters). This is a deliberate choice wisely done by the writers, which I'll address later.

- **GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operation System)** – (Shadow, Shapeshifter, Ally) – An AI super-computer developed in Aperture Laboratories to oversee the products' testing. GLaDOS was the one behind a giant massacre of the entire crew of the facility, leaving no one alive but the test subjects, allowing her to continue the testing. After being killed by Chell at the end of the previous game, GLaDOS is awakened due to a mistake made by a character and now is driven by rage and desire for revenge. GLaDOS is being portrayed as a sadistic maniac with a type of a "*God Complex*," and it seems as if 95% of her dialog uses a sarcastic tone. GLaDOS experiences a positive arc, starting as the main villain of the game, and after losing all her power, learning to set aside her pride and ego to cooperate with Chell. At the end she lets Chell go, after she retakes control over the building.
- **Wheatley** – (Mentor, Trickster, Shapeshifter, Shadow) – An AI personality core developed at Aperture Laboratories. Wheatley was designed as a means to weaken GLaDOS after she woke up and showed homicidal tendencies. He was designed to be an artificial moron that would stream his bad, ridiculous ideas into her and thus damaging her superb efficiency and making her less intelligent. After the idea had failed, Wheatley got the job of overseeing the test subjects in the suspension rooms. Even as he plays the role of the villain, Wheatley is an amusing, loveable character. He possesses some undesirable qualities (mainly opportunism), but at the same time he seems like a naïve and goofy character. Wheatley goes through a negative arc through the game. He starts as a nice and funny companion to Chell, helping her to navigate in the empty facility to get her out. Only after being attached to the main control of the building, Wheatley becomes power-drunk, defensive, and suffers from the "*Dunning-Kruger Effect*", which keeps getting worse as the game continues.
- **Cave Johnson** – (Trickster, Mentor, Herald) – The founder and first CEO of Aperture Laboratories. As his character is already dead at the time of the game, Cave Johnson is presented to us mainly by old recordings at the old parts of the facility. Johnson was an ambitious entrepreneur with a warm spot for science, trying to make his laboratories the best in their field. Yet, it's his impatience and lack of reasoning that causes a series of crises which put the facility, and himself in a bad spot. Although charismatic and ambitious, Johnson is described as unbalanced and lacking control over his temper. Johnson's character, comparing to GLaDOS and Wheatley, is flat. As a character he has only one practical role in the game (teach us that moon rocks are good portal conductors, foreshadowing how Chell will defeat Wheatley). The rest of his role is to teach us about the background and history of *Aperture Laboratories*, and more important – the background and history of GLaDOS.

Breakdown

Portal 2 is a game structured in a four-act plot structure.

The game starts when Chell wakes up at the *Aperture Laboratories'* facility, in a small motel-like room called *a suspension room* after fifty days of suspension. An automatic message confirms to her (and the player) that it is a typical routine and starts to guide her with "*physical and mental wellness exercises.*" These exercises are a smooth narrative justification for an initial controls' tutorial. In addition, this short part holds another critical role: the automatic announcer starts to build the foundation of the tone of the game: wordy, sarcastic, and filled with a somewhat dark humor.

Soon enough, after Chell wakes up again to find the room in a dysfunctional state, the title of the first chapter pops up, and we know the game and the story has officially begun.

At that moment, **the first act** starts: Chell meets Wheatley, the first character presented in the game, besides herself. Wheatley, in his wordy and goofy way of speaking gives us some more expositional information, presenting the conflict (trying to get Chell out of the building), as well as some environmental storytelling elements (when the walls of the chamber are tearing apart, we learn about the scales of the facility we're at, which gives us proportions of how hard our way out should be).

Wheatley moves our room through the building, and besides being an amusing part, it supplies us with a few important narrative details, and has another important role as well: it provides the player a major narrative design element of the game which is the provoking of the player's feelings and their manipulation.

That element was presented in the first game of the series, *Portal*, on somewhat smaller scales. It was presented, but mostly in specific places (a great example would be the test chamber containing *the companion cube*). In this game however, this element is presented a lot more, and starts to be implanted within the player from the very beginning.

To begin with, Chell, as a mute character, is a vessel of the player. By not talking, she lets the player **think** for her and **act** as her, which leads the player to **feel** for her as well. When the player's avatar gets speaking lines, we understand we are watching the events from his/her point of view. We can identify with their opinions, or not. Chell being mute, is a deliberate choice to make sure the player feels a greater connection to her. This is done by the player filling the gap of the lack of her responses.

Moreover, once Wheatley leads us to an old testing chamber and sends us to find the portal gun, the player also gets some subconscious vibes of loneliness, by having no one to interact with.

These two elements were seen in *Portal*, but to create a general mood. In *Portal 2* these two ways of manipulation are directed to a specific goal: make the player emotionally dependent on Wheatley.

The more time the player spends alone in that facility, the more he appreciates the times he hears the lovely British accent of the AI core, chattering around Chell.

Eventually, on their way out, Wheatley and Chell pass through GLaDOS's chamber and see her, broken into pieces and shut down. This moment is not uncommon in games: present the player a high-level enemy or even the boss in an unthreatening way

at early parts of the games. This is like a little teaser of what the player will deal with in the future.

After that moment, the story comes to its *inciting incident*, when (by accident) Wheatley turns on the wrong (or right) switches and activates GLaDOS.

This moment is the start of **the second act**. In this act, we are introduced to another main character, and a bit of a richer conflict: GLaDOS, the super-computer Chell destroyed at the end of the last game, is reactivated more bitter than ever. She separates Chell from Wheatley and throws her into testing chambers as a part of a resentful revenge plan.

The game at that moment, makes a switch of genres, from an "escape room" type of plot to a classic "good vs. evil" one, which is closer to the plot structure of its prequel, *Portal*. Chell is shown as the "good" protagonist, as GLaDOS is presented as the "evil" villain.

Earlier, I mentioned the player's emotional dependency on Wheatley. This is the first moment the player potentially feels it taking hold. Thinking Wheatley is destroyed and replacing of his amusing mumblings with GLaDOS's insults, puts the player in distress.

For that reason, when Chell sees Wheatley is alive in the middle of one of the testing chambers, the player feels great relief. As well, the player becomes even more emotionally dependent on Wheatley, because he now holds the role of savior.

When Wheatley indeed saves us from GLaDOS, he presents a (surprisingly) efficient plan to disarm her, which he and Chell carry out on their way to her chamber. The plan works, and while GLaDOS is disarmed, Chell and Wheatley succeed in defeating her at last.

Not long after, the game reaches its *crisis* and the *mid-point*, right before the end of the act. Once attached to the controls, Wheatley gets power drunk and shows signs of the "*Dunning-Kruger Effect*," and brags about "his" deeds in the story so far. When GLaDOS confronts him for doing nothing and taking the praise, he gets angry at her, as well as accuses Chell (the **mute** character) of being bossy and not believing in him. That is the moment when the player understands the game is far from over.

As a punishment, Wheatley transfers GLaDOS's core into a potato battery, as an act of humiliation. After doing so, GLaDOS in a moment of revelation, identifies him as a *corruption core*: a means for scientists to slow her down and lower her intelligence. When GLaDOS calls Wheatley a "moron", he gets highly defensive and shoves her into the same elevator where Chell is standing. He smashes it enough times for the whole thing to collapse into the pit, with both GLaDOS and Chell inside.

The third act starts as Chell and GLaDOS both fall through the "bottomless" elevator pit.

I mentioned several times before the emotional dependency the player builds towards Wheatley. This is its initial purpose: all the loneliness, the high contrast between Wheatley and GLaDOS, all lead the player to that moment of betrayal. The moment the player faces the fact that Chell's only friend threw her into an elevator pit, alongside her enemy.

The long fall is a deliberate choice by the writers as well. While GLaDOS is talking repeatedly about Chell's poor choice of putting Wheatley in charge, it gives the player time to rest from the emotional burst he might experience. This is a time for reflection. In my opinion, that is the reason that the episode is being called "*THE FALL*". It refers to the physical fall that is happening at the moment, but it can also refer to the term in the biblical terminology: "*The Fall*" is the act of being exiled from the Garden of Eden. While life there was simple and easy, "*The Fall*" is the time for the exiled to prepare himself for the complicated and messy life outside (a metaphorical fall). Every one of the characters involved needs that time for reflection: GLaDOS, losing her power; Chell, getting farther from the exit; and **the player**, processing the fact that this is not a simple "good vs. evil" narrative anymore, but more of a psychological thriller. The characters hold psychological baggage, and Chell was at the wrong place, at the wrong time and got caught in the crossfire.

When the fall is over, Chell wakes up at the bottom of the facility and the new storyline begins. The player finds himself in a new environment, with an entirely different visual language. He has no indication of where to go (unlike in the tests chambers) and has no companion to guide him. All of that is yet another way for the writers to provoke a new feeling in the player: unfamiliarity.

However, it is not long before Chell "meets" a new character: Cave Johnson, the founder and first CEO of *Aperture Laboratories*. His voice is heard through old, pre-recorded messages, and the player gets a glimpse of the history of the entire place. The player also gets to meet GLaDOS's spiritual father, and in some ways, can compare both characters' personalities: ambitious, sarcastic, and with a flare for drama.

With that, the writers start laying the ground for the next big emotional journey: GLaDOS's redemption. By showing us the similarities of the two characters, the player possibly starts to see GLaDOS as something more "humanized". This feeling gets stronger when Chell meets GLaDOS and agrees to cooperate with her to get back to the top of the building. In some ways, the player DOES feel relief when reuniting with GLaDOS. After spending so much time in such an unfamiliar place, the player starts to see GLaDOS as something he could only appreciate under those circumstances: something familiar. It is not friendship nor peace just yet between the two, but those are the first common things they share: a mutual goal and an enemy.

From that moment, when for the first time GLaDOS doesn't act with hostility towards Chell, the player can start to develop sympathy for her. Especially when he hears GLaDOS's reactions to the sound of Johnson's recordings. The player might even be the first to understand the big revelation of GLaDOS's identity, when she reacts to the messages in the same way, at the same time, as Johnson's assistant, Caroline. At the point when GLaDOS comes to that conclusion as well, the player can almost feel pity for her, learning Caroline didn't want to be the head of the company after Johnson's death. We also learn that Caroline didn't want to volunteer her brain for Johnson's last project of brain mapping, and thus becoming GLaDOS. That information can help the player to understand GLaDOS's pain which caused her to develop homicidal tendencies.

Cave Johnson's character, besides giving us a great amount of background information about the laboratories and GLaDOS herself, has another important role: he loads the most important *Chekov's gun* in the game's narrative: telling the player about moon rocks being good portal conductors.

When GLaDOS and Chell get back to the newer parts of the laboratories, the story reaches its **fourth act**. As the two aim to face off with Wheatley before the entire facility (under his management) collapses from under-maintenance, they are caught and trapped in his test chambers.

This act doesn't present us with any new characters nor a new type of conflict, but instead, it takes every plot line of the story (Chell's escape, Wheatley's insecurities, and GLaDOS's troubled existence) to their climax.

Right before that climax, after escaping from Wheatley and while on the way to his chamber, we can see again how the contradiction between GLaDOS and Wheatley affects the player's emotions towards them. While Wheatley reveals his stubborn, opportunist self, GLaDOS becomes the voice of reason. She also shows us signs of vulnerability, being devastated about the situation of the facility and sharing with us some hurtful details of her life. Besides provoking empathy from the player, those details, become handy later, when GLaDOS and Chell find a new way to weaken Wheatley – attaching other *corruption cores* (like himself) to him.

Unlike the last big battle (Wheatley and Chell vs. GLaDOS), in this fight, it feels like the weight of the battle is on **both** allies: GLaDOS and Chell work in coordination, both having significant roles in the encounter.

Working together with the one who not long ago was our rival; fighting against our once beloved ally; struggling with the time pressure of the collapse of the building; all contribute to yet another emotional burst at the very climax of the story.

The two inner conflicts of GLaDOS and Wheatley are at their peak – GLaDOS in order to defeat Wheatley, has to put her ego aside and to use the same technique the scientists used on her – *Corruption Cores*. Wheatley, on the other hand, also has the choice to set aside his pride and admit he can't handle the maintenance of the building, but fails to do so.

By the end, Chell and GLaDOS succeed to weaken Wheatley enough to force a transfer between him and GLaDOS, only for Wheatley to spoil their plan. It is then, when the ceiling crashes and the full moon is revealed, that the player can use the information he was given by Cave Johnson, and shoot his (Chekov's) portal gun at the actual moon to create a portal there.

The portal pulls the entire room into space, giving GLaDOS enough time to get back to the controls, save Chell, maintain the building, and throw Wheatley into space before closing the portal.

By the end of the game, GLaDOS reveals the three valuable lessons she learned from the experience: she identifies Chell as her friend; she learns where the essence of Caroline lays inside her; and after deleting it from her system, she learns the best solution to a problem is usually the simplest. And with that, she activates the elevator to free Chell from the building at last.

Those three lessons GLaDOS learns seem simplistic but have a deeper meaning. GLaDOS never knew peace in her life. She believed the voices in her head and *the itch* in her program would disappear once she would be free from outside control. Now she understands she was wrong. Chell, resembling the humans that hurt her, was not her enemy. It was Caroline, the human part inside of her, that filled her with false hope for

freedom, and the resulting pain when she couldn't fulfill it. Deleting Caroline from her system, erased the human needs inside of her as well. It was an act of acceptance: she won't be free, but she doesn't need to be. All she needs is to be at peace, which she can be now forever.

Strongest Element

In my opinion, the strongest element in the game's narrative is the relationship between GLaDOS and Chell throughout the game.

GLaDOS starts as a classic villain: an *all mighty super-computer* with the *tiny* hint of a "God Complex." She's full of resentment and rage, seeking revenge on Chell for killing her.

Their relationship at this stage is obvious: GLaDOS has all the cards, and all Chell can do is play her game. Only after the mid-point of the story, the narrative switches and so do the roles in Chell and GLaDOS's relationship. GLaDOS is now a useless potato battery and is entirely dependent on Chell to get back the controls of the facility. At this point, the two can explore each other's companionship from a different perspective: working together. Thus, they are learning to feel **sympathy** which leads to **empathy** towards each other.

It is at the very last part of the game, after the final battle against Wheatley is done, when the relationship is at its finest. After Chell and GLaDOS were able to shut down the portal on the moon, leaving Wheatley to float in space, there's a moment, when they are both laying on the ground horizontally looking at each other at the same level. That is the only moment in their relationship, when Chell and GLaDOS can feel like **equals**. Both did their parts in the battle, both almost died in the process.

After that moment we can understand GLaDOS's statement that Chell was her best friend. It wasn't because Chell helped her get back to the controls, but because GLaDOS felt, for once in her life, equal to someone. She wasn't a goddess, nor a useless potato, but a partner.

Unsuccessful Element

The game generally demonstrates strong consistency in the way it provides and foreshadows information. It is that fact that helps the players to dismiss or "forgive" some of the minor plot holes in it. However, there is one case of inconsistency in the game that I couldn't dismiss, and it is Wheatley's instant betrayal of Chell.

Wheatley is a full character. He is illogical, but his illogicalness has its own logic. Yet it seems unclear why, when GLaDOS (our mutual enemy) blames him for not doing anything and taking credit for Chell's work, he lashes out at Chell as well.

This is a small detail, but its significance is huge. This is the mid-point of the game, a major crisis, and for more of the times I played it, I was not able to understand what just happened and why.

To be completely candid, while writing this assignment, I got an idea of why it happened, and what went on inside of Wheatley's mind:

Wheatley *spits* a small racist note towards humankind during his journey with Chell. It almost goes under the radar, but it is proof he has some baggage against humans. It can be understood that when lashing out at Chell, he projects his anger on the other

humans he knew: the scientists that created him to be nothing more than a moron. When he talks to her, accusing her of *bossing him around*, he really talks to them.

The problem is that I can't find any proof in the game for any of that, and it remains as a theory.

Portal 2 excels with its smart foreshadowing, and ability to let the player figure out certain parts of the story without feeding it to him on a silver spoon, by always backing it up with clues and evidence from the game. Yet it seems there are almost no hints in the game to justify Wheatley's betrayal.

Highlight

On the other side of the fight, in the exact same scene as in the *Unsuccessful Element*, GLaDOS provides what I believe is the highlight of the story.

After defeating GLaDOS, Wheatley puts GLaDOS's program into a potato battery. At that moment, GLaDOS comes to the revelation, that Wheatley is an *Intelligence Dampening* sphere meant to slow her actions and damage her efficiency.

At the peak of the confrontation, she yells at Wheatley "*You're the moron they built to make me an idiot!*", and in my opinion, this is the highlight of the game for these reasons:

First, this sentence is an excellent example of the professionally written dialog in the game. The sentence isn't out of character for GLaDOS, keeping it sarcastic, insulting, and with a hint of dark humor, yet it is full of emotion that the player isn't used to seeing from her, which takes him by surprise.

Second, this line reveals for the first time the psychological depths of the two characters. We get a glimpse into GLaDOS's main struggle – constantly hearing voices from cores, *the itch*, and Caroline's human mind, and we also get to see Wheatley's inner conflict, trying hard to prove he is more than just the moron he was designed to be. This is the moment when they become full characters.

Critical Reception

- **IGN – Charles Onyett – 9.5/10** – *Charles Onyett* of *IGN* writes that *Portal 2* from its first to its last moment rarely falters. The attention to details is nothing but stunning. For example, as seen when GLaDOS wakes up and slowly fixing the facility to full function, like an extended version of herself. The game succeeds at the same places as the last one did and brings new elements to the table.
The only place it falters is at the second part of the game, when the pacing sags and the story becomes more concerned about the past.
- **PCGamer – Dan-01 – 94%** - *Dan-01* of *PCGamer* writes that a *third half* (math inaccuracy is deliberated) of the game's brilliance is its story. Its chambers are cohabitated by hilariously well-written and acted characters that exude personality, as all three major roles rattle off absurd dark humor and petty insults at every turn. Maybe the twist was easy to predict, but it was the character's reactions that was worth waiting for.
- **The Guardian – Nick Cowen – 5/5** – *Nick Cowen* of *The Guardian* writes that the player will find *Portal 2* funny throughout, but also faintly spinechilling. The

game's main campaign is longer than in *Portal* (its prequel), and arguably better too, calling the game a *masterpiece* created by *Valve*.

Lessons

- **Consistency** – *Portal 2* keeps the world and character's consistency more than most games around. This is one of the things that makes the story believable and the characters relatable. It also maintains the suspension of disbelief, which is incredibly important, especially when the game puts so much effort into affecting the players' emotions.
- **Scripting** – As games and movies (as different types of entertainment media) are compared a lot, the role of the script in games is in a very awkward situation. Not enough text can hurt the player's understanding of the game, and at the same time, too much (or unnecessary) text can harm the uniqueness of the medium in comparison to movies. *Portal 2* is a great example of how to use script right in video games.

Characters are very wordy and talk a lot, yet the script has mostly two roles: either it is a **game design** role of indicating the player is on the right path; or it is to **maintain the environment** of the world and the mood of the game. Thus, although there is a lot of talking throughout the game, the script doesn't take away from the uniqueness of the medium but complements it.

- **Interactivity** – As an interactive medium, computer games have an advantage over other entertainment media with their interactivity. Players who take an active part in the narrative can feel stronger reactions to the story. *Portal 2* uses this principle a lot and with very clever techniques. Thus, it succeeds in provoking strong emotions within its players by combining psychology (the mute player's avatar), level design (the difference between the old and new facility), and literature tools (Johnson's character complements GLaDOS's character by similarity; Wheatley complements her character by contrast).

Summation

Portal 2 is a great example of a strong story-based game that knows how to exploit the advantages of its medium:

On one hand, the game presents an exciting, complexed story that keeps adding depth as it continues. It starts as an "escape room" styled narrative, changes to "good vs. evil" classic, and finishes as a psychological thriller.

On the other hand, the game presents unique ways to complement the story within the medium, by using the player's interactivity to connect him emotionally to the story's events.

For me *Portal 2* will always be a game, that just like GLaDOS, one day was woken up, so it could live forever ("*Want You Gone*" reference).