Article

"Who Am I?": Rhetoric and Narrative Identity in the *Portal* Series

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Abstract

Portal and *Portal 2* are quests for narrative identity, whereby players attempt to understand who exactly the player is playing the game as—a woman who can outsmart a supercomputer and survive chambers full of deadly neurotoxin. Valve provides this answer gradually but does not do so explicitly—rather, as they play the games, the players must come to a conclusion on their own as to who Chell really is. By using this very complex form of procedural rhetoric as the core narrative heart of their games, Valve has created a story that relies upon procedural rhetoric, psychological models of identity, identification, and sociological bond formation in the player in order to rhetorically craft a narrative that is cocreated by the player during gameplay. Such rhetorical narrative cocreation has been a longtime goal of game designers, and Valve's achievement in *Portal* and *Portal 2* illustrate the rhetorical power of a procedurally generated narrative.

Keywords

rhetoric, narrative, procedural, identity, portal

Nobody expected *Portal* to be much of anything at all. A short, 2-hr bonus game that Valve distributed with the release of the much-delayed third episode of their tentpole franchise *Half-Life*, *Portal* was mostly intended to be an apology to gamers for making them wait for so long. Nobody expected that stand-alone copies of the little

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game that Valve boxed in with *Half-Life* for free would outsell any of the games it had been attached to; as of a year ago, *Portal* boasted over 4 million physical units sold, which has made it the best-selling game that Valve has ever produced (Rose, 2011). So, when Valve decided to make a sequel to *Portal*, they knew that they needed to catch lightning in a bottle again—and they started with a series of fresh ideas which, they hoped, would lead to something just as original as the first game was. An entirely new narrative was crafted, with entirely new characters, as a prequel to the game. Fans and testers enjoyed it thoroughly, at first.

Midway through the early technical demo of *Portal 2*, however, testers encountered GlaDOS, the mad, computerized arch villain from the first *Portal* game and immediately wondered why she didn't recognize them (Walker, 2012). In one iteration of the tech demo, the game designers went so far as to put a mirror into the beginning area, so that players could see their own reflection, and make it clear that they were not Chell, the protagonist from the first game. It didn't matter that the game was a prequel or that the character that players were playing wasn't Chell—players wanted GlaDOS to recognize them, and to react to them, for whom they were in the first *Portal* game . . . which was very strange, as Chell never spoke, was named only in the credits, and could only even be seen if players manipulated game mechanics to do so. So, Valve scrapped everything that they'd planned and made a direct sequel to *Portal*, working with many of the same themes and set pieces as had been used in the first game.

The core narrative theme of the series as a whole only arises late in the first game, but it becomes the central theme of the rest of the series: Who am I? *Portal* and *Portal 2* are a quest for narrative identity, whereby players attempt to understand who exactly this almost-nameless, almost-faceless, orange-jumpsuited woman is—a woman who can outsmart a supercomputer, remain cool and collected in the face of military robots, incandescent deathtraps, and a chambers full of deadly neurotoxin. The answer to this core question is given very gradually, but it is not given formally—rather, by playing the games themselves, the *player* must come to a conclusion on their own as to who Chell really is. By using this very complex form of procedural rhetoric as the core narrative heart of their games, Valve has created a story that relies upon psychological models of identity, identification, organizational interaction, and sociological bond formation in the *player*, not in any of the game's characters, in order to rhetorically craft a narrative that is cocreated by the players of the game during gameplay. Many developers have tried for a long time to create such a narrative, and Valve seems to have succeeded entirely by accident. The *Portal* games' use of rhetorical and psychological structures to affect the player, rather than the character, is among the most brilliantly innovative moments in modern video gaming history; combined, the use of procedural rhetoric and psychology in the creation of game narratives, not just gameplay elements, is profoundly original. Such originality demands examination, so that we can understand why this sort of narrative has not been created previously and so that we can understand how and why it is advantageous for such works to be created now.

Rhetorical Context

At the outset of this project, a few delineations are useful. First, we will not be considering the *Portal* games as games per se but rather as texts that seek interaction with a player. To treat the game as a game would demand discussions of physics, puzzle planning, and level design which are neither fruitful nor relevant to our discussion here, as without its script and paratextual elements, the *Portal* games are merely physics platformers, little physically different from a host of other games that came before them. The core mechanical concept of the game—a player equipped with the ability to create and recreate bivalent portals which completely conserve mass, energy, and velocity—is indeed unique among these games, but it is ultimately a navigation tool and, while clever, is not responsible for the series' massive success.

Crucially, while the narrative and setting of the games are most certainly rhetorical, the actual gameplay mechanics in the *Portal* games are not. To explain more robustly, Bogost (2007) examines several games in *Persuasive Games*, where the mechanics of the games themselves are inherently and obviously rhetorical; this is indeed the most obvious form of game-related procedural rhetoric. However, Bogost (2007) also observes that procedural rhetoric is not limited to gameplay mechanics; a simple reskinning of *Space Invaders* as *Tax Invaders*, for instance, with no fundamental gameplay changes, is enough to make the game rhetorical. Games may be rhetorical, we can see, in a manner completely independent of their mechanical understructure. We will examine the *Portal* series in this respect.

The *Portal* games were inspired by *Narbacular Drop*, a proof-of-concept game that primarily explored the essential function of the core game mechanic: the portals themselves. Due to the extreme mobility that this game mechanic represented, when Valve began to create *Portal*, it crafted a narrative in which all of the environments that the player would encounter would be deliberately limited—a literal test track. Many of the narrative elements central to the games were adapted from pop cultural commonplaces; for instance, GlaDOS, the insane, amoral, murderous supercomputer that functions as the game's primary antagonist has clear roots in HAL, from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Aperture Science Enrichment Center, where the entirety of both games take place, looks like a room designed by Apple, and Chell is presented in a featureless orange jumpsuit, essentially identical to those worn by American prisoners. The *Portal* series, in short, is squarely situated in a robust popular science fiction tradition, upon which it relies, and which it taps frequently to great effect. The environments, costuming, and props in the game spring from many of the same cultural commonplaces.

Despite the corporate precision and the carefully crafted facade of propriety that the Aperture Science Enrichment Center maintains, Valve subtly, and then with increasing brazenness, shows the player that this facade is just that—a sham—and that something has gone horrifically wrong, particularly in the first *Portal* game. However, as the main character never speaks to anyone, it falls to the player to construct this wrongness, largely independent of the game itself. In Chamber 16, for

Figure 1. Chamber 16 in Portal.

example, the player has the opportunity to sneak behind one of the panels which make up the walls of the Enrichment Center (Figure 1), in front of which the word "help" is scrawled in blood; if the player chooses to do so—there is no consequence for ignoring the opportunity and no reward for investigation—the player will find a rusted-out den, presumably the home of a previous test subject, where someone survived for some time on beans and water, cooked on the CPU chips of computers. The walls are scrawled with warnings and paranoid ramblings. As the player proceeds, more of these dens are discoverable through exploration, with similar accoutrements and warnings. Yet, despite all this textual (i.e., scripted) and paratextual (i.e., purely environmental) narrativity, the onus remains totally on the player to construct the nature of what has gone wrong in the first *Portal* game—at least, until the end of Chamber 19, where GlaDOS finally attempts to kill Chell directly.

In each of the two *Portal* games, there are in fact two narratives: the overt, scripted narrative, and the subsumed, implied, unscripted narrative which the player must actively engage with to cocreate. While the overt narratives—escape in *Portal* and the discovery of GlaDOS' and Aperture Laboratories' history in *Portal 2*—are interesting and certainly worthy of criticism, the way that the two implied narratives are created is far more so, rhetorically speaking. The mere fact that there is in each game an entire narrative which is completely unscripted and which, in point of fact, is only even hinted at by environmental factors and implication from other, unrelated events, is marvelous, because it demands direct, creative input from the *player* of the game, even if each player ends up with essentially the same answer. For instance, in the wake of *Portal 2*, a large number of players spent some effort in an attempt to demonstrate that Chell was, in fact, Caroline's daughter and that the moment

GlaDOS realized that fact, she could no longer bear to kill her. All this is despite the fact that there is absolutely no direct evidence for such a relationship in the game itself and that everything that the proponents of the concept use to promote their thesis is the result of inference and correlation (FusedCore, 2011). We shall examine this response as we proceed, as emblematic of player response generally.

Theoretical Approaches

Such a novel reality in the game worlds of *Portal* and *Portal 2* demands a novel theoretical tool to describe it, and Ian Bogost provides such a tool in his conceptualization of procedural rhetoric, as presented in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. "Procedural rhetoric," he argues, "is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular" (Bogost, 2007). The power of procedural rhetoric is quite plain, once one understands the basic premise; in the same way that a pointed, well-formed rhetorical question can be enormously persuasive because the audience must supply the answer that the rhetor is demanding, so too is procedural rhetoric a potent tool in a well-crafted context. Asking a rhetorical audience to proceed through a series of steps that have been designed to demonstrate the evidentiary thesis and supporting evidence for a particular case is fundamentally no different than asking a well-designed rhetorical question; a path is laid out for the audience to walk through, and the mere act of proceeding along that series of steps has the power to persuade.

One of the most valuable aspects of a procedural criticism of a text is that, as Bogost observes, "procedural rhetorics afford a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work*" (Bogost, 2007). Where conventional rhetoric exposes a problem and posits a solution, or visual rhetoric observes a scene and posits a rhetorical impact, procedural rhetoric is unique in that it allows us to expose a method, a way of being, or a process of creation as inherently problematic, with an embedded, entailed argument for its improvement, abolition, or amelioration. To clarify a bit, traditional rhetoric is a model, tracing back to the Ancients, wherein a single or corporate rhetor attempts to convince an audience of something with language. Visual rhetoric is distinct therefrom because it, as a form, attempts to convince not with language, but with images, formatting, and the arrangement of images and, sometimes, text together. Procedural rhetoric is distinct from both forms because it demands an active, participatory audience to function; the audience must by definition, in other words, move through the steps of the rhetorical procedure; as such, the audience must construct on their own terms the argument that the rhetor who designed the procedure wishes them to.

Bogost goes on to argue that procedural rhetoric is most plainly evident in video games, as few other contexts ask or demand that a person proceed through a series of well-ordered steps in such a clear manner. While this proposition is not terribly inconvenient to us—we are, after all, performing criticism on a pair of video games—I find that it would be deeply problematic to allow this argument to pass

unchallenged. Bogost observes rightly that the realities of computer code and scripted, interactive narrative—video games, in short—do indeed expose procedural rhetoric in an extremely clear way. However, to argue that a new mode of rhetoric has come into being as a result of our technological innovation is extremely problematic. One could make a salient argument that a properly written book, such as *The Jungle* or *Oroonoko*, is inherently procedural, as they seek to persuade the reader through no other means than by walking him or her through the process of, respectively, factory work or slavery. Both were hugely successful. Similarly, to hearken back to a perhaps overused example, Bitzer's Trobariand Islanders could be fairly said to be in a procedurally oriented training regimen, as they fish under the guidance of a well-seasoned supervisor who demands that they complete certain steps at the proper moments; after all, successful completion of those steps leads to fish, and as such to full bellies (Bitzer, 1969). A powerful argument, indeed.

If we are to look at procedural rhetoric, then, it ought to be in a much more broad sense than Bogost lays out in *Persuasive Games*. In light of our observations on the nature of procedural rhetoric, a broader and simpler definition of procedural rhetoric is necessary. Procedural rhetoric, therefore, is any discourse or action that becomes persuasive when an audience completes a rhetorically oriented series of steps. Expansive, certainly, but necessarily so. Our advantage in expanding Bogost's definition of procedural rhetoric is 2-fold. First, we can use his theories to criticize a much broader cross section of human discourse than the original definition would allow us. By far, the most important advantage, however, is that it allows us to bring in additional theoretical perspectives which will not only allow us to understand more clearly why procedure can be so terrifically rhetorical but also how the particular procedures employed in the *Portal* games function to craft such a concise, clear implied narrative.

The heart of process is narrative, insofar as psychological structures function. The essential linkage, in other words, by which any series of steps combine to form a coherent, logical progression of one to another (and so forth) is the embodied, lived, human understanding of the audience experiencing it. Hence, rhetorical process relies upon the personal narrative of the audience, who must parse the disparate steps of the rhetorical object into an understandable whole in order for the procedure to function as a rhetorical object; this is what Bogost means when he discusses the way that games like *The McDonald's Game* use player choice to steer players toward taking destructive action against their own best interests (Bogost, 2007). This being the case, we must pause for a moment to examine the holistic experience of the personal narrative more completely, as this is a complex phenomenon which Bogost does not fully address.

"When we verbalize an experience," observes Schiffrin, "we situate that experience *globally*: by drawing on our cultural knowledge and expectations about typical courses of action in recurrent situations, we construct story topics, themes, and points. We also situate that experience *locally*: we verbally place our past experiences in, and make them relevant to, a particular 'here' and 'now', a particular

audience, and a particular set of interactional concerns and interpersonal issues'' (Schiffrin, 1996). Narrative, and particularly personal narrative, is a function of factual occurrence, expediency, relevance, and usefulness; in any given telling of the same story, various aspects of that story might be emphasized or suppressed based on the perceived exigency, the audience, and what message the narrator is trying to convey. In short, Shiffrin observes that narrative is extremely contextual and responds strongly to the needs and demands of the narrator and the audience, all of which ''make[s] narrative a particularly effective vehicle for communicating experience to others in a pragmatically useful form'' (Braid, 1996, p. 5). So, narrative is a powerful organizational force for individualized understanding of the world, but its mere existence implies another, an audience to whom the story must eventually be told for it to be salient or relevant.

If we are to bring a discussion of audience into play, as we must in order to eventually address the *Portal* games well, we need to look at the way that humans self-organize into disparate audiences; if this were not a relevant factor, the entire concept of a malleable narrative, which we just observed, would implode. As such, we now move into a brief examination of social identity and identification, which are essential components thereof. Reicher argues that ''action is a function of context because the operation of psychological processes depends on social parameters'' and proceeds to explain that a person's need to fit into, break away from, or create a new social context is the root of almost all human action—that, in short, individual action is necessarily and fundamentally predicated upon group identification (Reicher, 2004, p. 921). ''Individuals use'' such social groups ''to define themselves in terms of perceived shared similarities with members of their group in contrast to other social categories,'' and in doing so craft both an individualized and a corporate sense of identity, from which volition, will, and drive flow (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005, p. 19). The processes by which individuals self-organize into such social groups are hugely complex, and a robust discussion of the modes by which this organization occurs is far beyond the scope of this article; it is sufficient for our purposes to say that ''identity is essentially the set of beliefs or meanings that answer the question, 'Who am I?' or in the case of [a social group], 'Who are we?''' (Foreman & Whetten, 2002, p. 618).

In many ways, this is what procedural rhetoric is about, at its very center: The audience must take on a role that he or she identifies with, at least to some extent, and proceed through a series of steps that will induce him or her to either fully embrace that role or to reject it as unacceptable. Such associative and dissociative tools are hugely powerful; anyone can observe, for instance, their centrality in the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, or the gay rights' debate today.

Narrative structure is essential in a consideration of procedural rhetoric, therefore, not merely as a way of organizing and understanding the world, but as an entailed component of procedural rhetoric itself, because procedure ultimately has no referent, or real-world context, without narrative structure. Procedures, whether

rhetorical or not, are generally arranged in an abstracted narrative form, which asks its audience to 'do this, then that,' with each stage of the process dependent upon and presupposing the existence of a previous step.

To return to our starting point, we can now add a little more context to our expanded definition of procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric is, we can now say with some sense of comprehensiveness, any discourse or action that becomes persuasive when an audience completes a psychologically targeted, rhetorically oriented, socially contextualized series of steps that take advantage of that audience's individual or corporate psychological identification in order to convince or persuade them. A bit wordier than our earlier thesis, which remains true in and of itself, if simplified, but our more robust, inclusive statement exposes the operational engine, so to speak, upon which procedural rhetoric relies for its function.

Narrative Structure

To this point, we have played a little fast and loose with a crucial term—narrativity. Game studies have seen no small amount of turbulence in its deployment as disparate theorists have used narrativity at cross purposes in order to fit their particular practical needs and theoretical orientations. While I think that this sort of turbulence is quite healthy, especially given the young state of game studies, it means that we must pause and examine narrativity with some thoughtfulness.

White supplies a very good, if classical and literarily oriented, examination of narrative and one that has been widely influential. In our fraught circumstances, it represents a place of common origin for all parties and a sensible place for us to start out from. White (1980) argues, via Barthes, that "'narrative . . . is *translatable* without fundamental damage' in a way that" poetry and philosophy is not, and his meaning in this is as much figurative as literal (p. 6). Narrative can move between languages and cultures, and while details are often lost or transmuted, the essential heart of narrative is not; narrative is, thus, "a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted" (White, 1980, p. 6).

Game studies critics have engaged with narrativity on predictable, though not unworthy, grounds. Narrative, for instance, "exists in a context of many other textual features that are usually absent in a print story" (Punday, 2012, p. 28). Some theorists look at how the graphic presentation of a game's user interface affects narrativity, while others dig into the implications of a player-controlled main character, one which is therefore on a nonprescribed narrative track, even if that character's narrative options are limited. Games like the *Grand Theft Auto* or *Saints Row* series illustrate that particular point of interest very well. Punday (2012) himself is concerned with reader positioning and digs into narrative details—Aarseth's application of intrigues to game narratives—which would be of some value to an examination of the first *Portal* game in another context.

All of these theorists work from a common ground, however, and I think that the fundamental unity of what we are all talking about may be getting lost in the churn of that discussion. Narrative is the storytelling structure that allows us to understand a given story across culture, genre, time, and form. It neither concerns itself with details nor asks that the reader or audience be concerned therewith. It allows one person to understand another's lived or imagined human experience and does so by speaking to that same human universality which White observed almost 35 years ago.

It is this general, universal, organizational framework that I speak of when I speak of narrative, and I choose it for two essential reasons. First, there has been a push—and a fascinating one, at that—to reconceptualize narrative to be respondent specifically to the needs and peculiarities of video games. I am not, however, a narrativist, and I am not primarily a game critic; I am a rhetorician, and I feel that it would be presumptuous of me to substitute my judgment for that of specialists in those fields. While I am working with the *Portal* games here, I am doing so because they illustrate a new *rhetorical* point. Second, my theoretical ends depend on a definition of narrativity which is concrete enough to support my experimentation with procedural rhetoric, and I think that taking a side—any side—at this stage of the debate would be akin to building a castle upon sand. Focusing the rhetorical theory of this piece to accommodate a more apt definition of narrativity specific to games would be fairly simple, and the sort of straightforward, evolutionary thought that any critic could apply without my aid. Needing to rebuild my rhetorical point from a collapsed narrativistic framework would doom my larger point.

Procedural Rhetoric in *Portal*'s Main Narrative

Procedural rhetoric functions fairly simply in *Portal*. There is no great hidden meaning in the game, no object of highly complex analysis; the game's procedure seeks, quite simply, to convince the player of what will become a narrative, scripted reality later. The only key difference between the scripted and implied narrative, for the vast majority of the game, is the pace at which key information about the nature of the game's story is revealed.

The first sign that something has gone wrong in *Portal* is subtle, but immediate: In order to leave the room where Chell woke up, the player must pick up a weight and put it on a button to open a door—simplicity itself. The room which you must do this in is simple, and an automated camera mounted in the corner tracks your movements, so the player knows that he or she is being watched. There is a fogged glass window set into the north wall, through which the player can make out a computer chair, a desk, and a computer, but no human observer. Odd, but not critical. Once the player has actually begun the game properly, in Chamber 1, there is another, similar fogged glass window, similarly devoid of human inhabitants. In Chamber 2, there are two such fogged glass offices, both empty. *Every* test chamber, in fact, has such observational offices, all of which are empty. And yet the game's environment is studded with active, tracking cameras. If you use the game's mechanics to knock

a camera off the wall, GlaDOS scolds you for doing so immediately. You are being watched, the game says silently, but not by human beings.

This sense of wrongness intensifies quickly, as in Chamber 5, GlaDOS admits openly to lying to you, even though she promises to stop doing so . . . and experiences an audible glitch while doing so. Chamber 6 is the first sign that something's really wrong, though, as you suddenly find yourself testing with objects that are deadly; the player is informed subsequently that safety apparatus, such as alarms, has been disabled "for your safety" (*Portal,* 2007). The chambers following shortly thereafter begin to show visible signs of decay, as though they haven't been maintained in some time.

By the time the player finds the first of several behind-the-scenes hidey-holes formerly inhabited by one Doug Rattman, a prior inhabitant of the Enrichment Center, whom the player never meets or sees, with its blood-scrawled pleas for help and its dire warnings about GlaDOS' observation and dishonesty, an engaged player will already be largely certain of GlaDOS' villainhood and of the terrible fate that has befallen the Enrichment Center. Rattman, however, allows the player to catalyze their growing sense of opposition and separation because he is another human being, someone just as scared as you are and just as desperate to escape.

But why is Rattman so welcome, then? The appearance of his warnings is an indication that the player's worst fears have been actualized and that GlaDOS, the only other social contact which the player has had throughout the game, will certainly try to kill Chell deliberately. Yet, Rattman's dens are among the most beloved parts of the first and second games, and his paranoid ramblings have been made into posters and T-shirts in endless variety which people have spent considerable sums of real money to buy. In fact, the game's most famous line comes not from GlaDOS, but from Rattman: "The Cake is a Lie" became an explosively popular Internet meme and has even found its way into media references in a wide variety of other video games and even some TV shows. Diekema offers an interesting explanation, as he theorizes about what it means to be alone. "Although aloneness certainly has individual components (e.g. feelings, thoughts), it is the extent to which these individual components are shared or mutually recognized that helps define the type of aloneness in question. . . . Other-imposed aloneness, as exemplified in isolation . . . [which is] initiated by others or occurs through the loss of enduring relationships" (Dikema, 1992, p. 482).

This isolation is confirmed in Chamber 19, where GLaDOS declares that "The test is now over. All Aperture technologies remain safely operational up to 4,000 degrees Kelvin. Rest assured, there is absolutely no chance of a dangerous equipment malfunction prior to your victory candescence," as Chell is slowly transported into a large, fiery pit, surrounded by walls which she cannot place a portal onto (*Portal,* 2007). If the player takes no action, she dies, and the game is over; only by actively rebelling from the script of the game—and GLaDOS' oppressive control—can the player realize that by portalling into the fiery pit itself, they can burst the boundaries of the narrative and escape. From that point, the game becomes a mad

flight through the rusted underbelly of the Enrichment Center as GlaDOS attempts, with increasing levels of extremity, to kill Chell.

GlaDOS is a nonhuman opponent, someone whom the player is fairly certain is out to kill him or her and as such cannot be a component of the social group that the player defines himself or herself as being a part of. Rattman, even in absentia, is human and, what's better, a human who's been there before, who wants what we want, and from whom we can accept guidance. After the player's escape in Chamber 19 and it becomes clear that the only resolution between GlaDOS and Chell will be one of climactic conflict, the player flees madly through the rusted underbelly of the Enrichment Center—and at every step are Rattman's blood-smeared murals, pointing the way to freedom. He becomes an absent friend, the predecessor who we're hoping to catch up with. We, as a player and a person, identify with him and against GlaDOS because, in our intense solitude, he is the only person we *can* latch on to.

Who Am I? Procedural Rhetoric in *Portal 2*'s Main Narrative

The main narrative for *Portal 2* begins in *Portal*, as *Portal 2* is a sequel that is strongly connected to its predecessor. As the main narrative of *Portal* is reaching its climax, GlaDOS begins an increasingly desperate psychological assault against Chell as she literally tears GlaDOS apart piece by piece. The beginning is, naturally, a lie; GlaDOS begins by saying that "all of [Chell's] other friends couldn't come . . . [to a non-existent party where Chell's accomplishments would be celebrated] because [Chell] doesn't have any friends, because of how unlikeable [she is]. It says so right here in [her] personnel file. Unlikeable," but once the player has destroyed the curious and logical portions of GlaDOS, she becomes truly desperate (*Portal*, 2007). "It also says you were adopted . . . ." she continues, "You've been wrong about every single thing you've ever done, including this thing. You're not smart. You're not a scientist. You're not a doctor. You're not even a full-time employee! Where did your life go so wrong?" (*Portal*, 2007). Finally, she claims to delete "your backup," which means that no matter what happens now, "you're dead" (*Portal*, 2007). After this, she has little more to say, and you must either destroy her or die.

All of the questions that GlaDOS raises in the end of the first *Portal* game combine to form the implied narrative of the second game. The scripted narrative of *Portal 2* is, while not uncomplicated, at least fairly straightforward: It is the story of Chell's escape and GlaDOS' rediscovery of her true self, which she had lost. Wheatley, the enemy who brings these two unlikely companions together, plays an incompetent, humorous, and ultimately ineffective foil to both of them. He, however, knows nothing about either Chell or GlaDOS, and as such is irrelevant to our work here.

Rattman knows a great deal about both Chell and GlaDOS, and he communicates that knowledge to us in a series of six dens hidden throughout the game, plus a few additional bits of graffiti here and there. The first of the Rattman dens is remarkable,

as it depicts, in a multipanel mural, some of the crucial history we've been missing. The first panel depicts GlaDOS, surrounded by seven white-coated scientists. The second panel depicts GlaDOS again and this time the scientists are dying in agony. Rattman hides in the foreground. The third panel shows GlaDOS offering Chell cake, while Rattman again hides. In the fourth panel, GlaDOS has been destroyed, and Rattman has the chance to escape with the portal device. The fifth panel is a beautiful portrait of Chell, unconscious, with her arms outstretched. These five panels refer to *Portal 2: Lab Rat*, in which a more complete story of Rattman's escape and of his manipulation of both Chell and GlaDOS is told. Rattman's dens are quite useful, but the player does not have the opportunity to access any of them until after GlaDOS has been reactivated, and Chell has been recaptured and forced to test again.

Where, in *Portal*, GlaDOS was mostly a vague opponent until the very end of the game, in *Portal 2*, she is an oppressive, overtly evil force, and all but tells you that she's decided to "devote the rest of [her] existence to exacting revenge" on Chell, even going so far as to say that, once Chell dies, she "might take up a hobby. Reanimating the dead, maybe," (*Portal 2*, 2011). Fortunately, in her attempts to wound Chell, GlaDOS tells us quite a lot; combined with the Rattman dens, it becomes clear early on that *Portal 2* is a game that is as much about discovering who Chell is and where she came from as it is about anything else.

Several of the Rattman dens in *Portal 2*, which continue the first game's tradition of optional, behind-the-scenes glimpses at the psychology of the schizophrenic Doug Rattman, or which simply show some of the music or artwork which Valve commissioned for the game, or which refers to in-game jokes, are helpful. Den 4, in Chamber 12, is of interest; it depicts GlaDOS and bears the caption "Who are you?" (Valve, 2007). The fifth, in Chamber 16, shows another pile of dead scientists, in a rehash of the first Rattman den. The last den, however, is of some importance; as we observed earlier, it depicts Chell, unconscious, superimposed over a bell curve labeled "Tenacity" (Figure 2), which correlates to a report on her from *Portal 2: Lab Rat* that indicates that she is never to be tested (Figure 3) because she "never gives up. Ever," (Valve, 2011a). As, despite his insanity, Rattman is a fairly reliable narrator insofar as his statements correspond directly to what hard evidence the games' canon presents about Chell's history, his observations about her are the only really reliable information we have about her.

GlaDOS, of course, is quite happy to supply us with information about Chell, but that information must be treated as exceptionally suspect, as one of GlaDOS' core character traits is that she lies almost constantly, particularly when she thinks that she can wound Chell by doing so. One of her repeated claims, however, raises interesting questions: that of Chell's parentage or, more properly, her status as an adopted child. This claim has something of the ring of truth to it, in that GlaDOS uses it not in and of itself, as she does with so many of her other lies, but rather as the basis for more convoluted jabs. For instance, on the completion of Chamber 5, GlaDOS observes, "Here come the test results. 'You are a horrible person ....' We weren't

Figure 2. Chamber 17 in Portal 2.

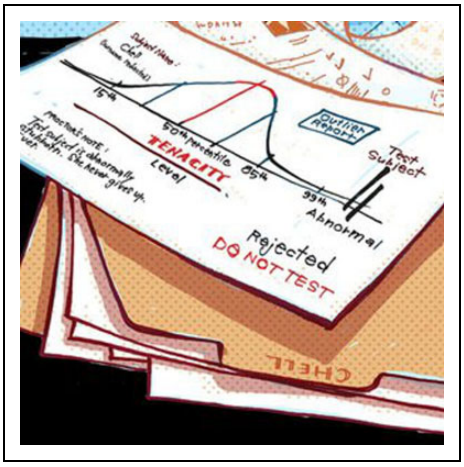

Figure 3. Portal 2: Lab rat personnel file.

even testing for that .... If it makes you feel any better, science has now validated your birth mother's decision to abandon you on a doorstep" (Valve, 2011b). Later, once you've made your way through some of the background of the facility, the player encounters the remains of a science fair. Among the other posters and behind an enormous, mutated potato which was apparently "injected with chemicals from Daddy's work," is a poster signed "by Chell," (Figure 4; Valve, 2011b). Much later, when Wheatley attempts to use Chell's status as an adopted child against her in the

Figure 4. Young Chell's science fair project.

same way that GlaDOS had previously, GlaDOS counters his insults by asking "And? What exactly is wrong with being adopted?" (Valve, 2011b). As Wheatley tries ineffectually to answer the question, GlaDOS adds in a stage whisper that, "for the record, you are adopted, and that's terrible, but just work with me" (Valve, 2011b).

Given the evidence from Chell's poster, we are left with a question as follows: If Chell began as the (adoptive) daughter of an Aperture Laboratories employee, how did she get captured? *Portal 2: Lab Rat* answers this question neatly; it calls forward a reference from *Portal*, that "bring your daughter to work day is an excellent opportunity to have [your daughter] tested" and informs us that GlaDOS seized control of the facility on that day, massacring the staff of the company by filling it with a deadly neurotoxin (Valve, 2007, 2011). That being the case, the rest of Chell's backstory falls into place: She was the daughter of an Aperture Laboratories employee and is a survivor of the Bring Your Daughter to Work Day Massacre. In sum, the claim of adoption appears to hold true and is supported by evidence of Chell's parentage from both the comic and the game. But how do we move from there to the final assumption of those fans who have taken this evidence—and, except for an Italian operetta in the game's end credits which refers to Chell as "my child" in fairly standard operatic hyperbole, this represents the entirety of their evidence—and construed it to mean that Caroline, the personality that created GlaDOS, is or was Chell's mother? (Valve, 2011b)

The beauty of procedural rhetoric in this case is its robustness, because the only sensible answer to our question must be furnished contextually, as a corresponding player-created side text to the overt narrative of the game. We noted before that the

main scripted narrative of *Portal 2* is the story of GlaDOS rediscovering who she is. The player and Chell are present for this process of self-rediscovery, which occurs not only in the context of GlaDOS' personal history, but in the context of the history of Aperture Laboratories, Cave Johnson, and Wheatley as well—literally every character and setting to appear in the game. With all of this history infusing the script and setting of every aspect of the game, the player needs to latch on to something or someone that they can associate with, and to everyone's surprise, that person turns out to be GlaDOS. As she rediscovers Caroline, GlaDOS' voice modulation changes subtly and becomes more human and less computerized. She begins to sympathize with, and even help, Chell. And, finally, as you move to confront Wheatley for the final time and save the facility, GlaDOS has become aware of her own psychological transformation; panicked, she says that "the scientists were always hanging [computer] cores on me to regulate my behavior. I've heard voices all my life, but now I hear the voice of a conscience and it's terrifying, because for the first time, it's *my* voice. I'm being serious. I think there's something really wrong with me!" (Valve, 2011b).

Chell's relationship with GlaDOS changes radically at the end of the game, when Chell defeats Wheatley by flinging him, and herself, through a portal to the moon. Chell would certainly have died in this exchange, except that GlaDOS reaches through the portal and saves Chell's life, after two full games of trying desperately to kill her. Immediately thereafter, when Chell regains consciousness, GlaDOS is clearly relieved and admits that she "thought you were [her] greatest enemy, when all along you were [her] best friend" and then releases Chell, claiming that it's easier than killing her, despite evidence to the contrary. Along the way, Chell is serenaded by a vast Italian operetta, sung to her by a field of GlaDOS' minions who lament her departure, and gets one last look at her mutated super potato. The entirety of the resolution of Chell's storyline, in short, is in the context of the resolution and rediscovery of everyone else's history and connection to Aperture Laboratories; as such, it is almost impossible for the player *not* to construct the parallel and attached narrative of Chell's history within that same context. GlaDOS has rediscovered her hidden self and is suddenly incapable of killing Chell. She has robust, thorough information on Chell's history, including whom she was (and wasn't) related to. And, in that moment, where the part of GlaDOS that was once Caroline fully manifests itself, she finds herself compelled to save Chell's life and then to give her the one thing she's been stubbornly fighting for the entire narrative of the games. If you walk someone through those steps in any narrative, the simple act of experiencing and internalizing all of this information compels the player to construct a conforming, salient narrative that resolves those loose plot threads in a neat, tidy way. And, as the result of a rather elaborate series of demonstrative and associative steps, an entirely unscripted, player-generated, and canonically correct script is born.

Conclusion

It's far from a new idea in video game design to induce a player to take an active role in the cocreation of a script with the game itself, but no game before *Portal* and, more fully, *Portal 2*, had realized this dream so fully. Previous attempts relied upon models of textual creation, wherein the player chose a story path from a limited, predetermined number of prescripted narrative threads; while this design allowed for hugely customizable games, the narratives that they produced were still literally written into the code of the game and told to the player outright. The procedural creation of narrative worked in the *Portal* series because the writers at Valve realized that if they wanted to truly involve the player of the game in the creation of the story that they would have to deliberately manipulate the psychology of that player as part and parcel of the process. The story of Chell's history, the story of her *identity*, really, then becomes deliberately subsumed into a more prominent narrative about GlaDOS' history and identity in order to draw the player into making the obvious connection between Chell and GlaDOS.

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