Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Portal
Platform: PC / Xbox 360 / Playstation 3
Genre: First Person Platformer/Puzzle
Release Date: 10/9/07 (PC/360) / 12/11/07 (PS3)
Developer: Valve
Publisher: Valve
Game Writer: Erik Wolpaw, Chet Faliszek
Review Author: Kwan Perng

Overview

The player's avatar is Chell, a test subject who awakens inside a test chamber at Aperture Laboratories, a government-contracted research and development company. She is greeted by GLaDOS, an enigmatic computer personality that guides Chell through a series of challenges and test rooms. She acquires a Handheld Portal Device that can create portals which Chell (and other objects) can pass through.

As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent to the player that something is wrong in the facility. Chell is the only human in the lab, and GlaDOS puts Chell in increasingly dangerous situations, such as test chambers guarded by sentry turrets utilizing live ammunition. By the end of the game GLaDOS is established as dishonest and unreliable; when Chell completes the final test, GLaDOS attempts to murder her by moving Chell towards a pit of lava.

Chell escapes using the Handheld Portal Device, and traverses through a series of maintenance and office rooms outside of the test chambers. She finally comes face to face with the core of GLaDOS. It is revealed that GLaDOS had killed everyone in the lab prior to the game's events using lethal gas. The computer begins releasing the gas but Chell manages to destroy GLaDOS' computer cores before this occurs.

Characters

Chell: The protagonist of *Portal* and the player's avatar. Chell is a young female test subject who finds herself alone in a series of test chambers within Aperture Laboratories. She has no dialogue in the game, is rarely seen by the player and there is little information revealed about her background. Thus, the player becomes fully immersed into the role of the hero rather than the character of Chell.

GLaDOS: The antagonist of *Portal*. GLaDOS is a manipulative and cunning artificial intelligence that

has control over most Aperture security and control systems. Throughout the game GLaDOS serves as a guide to the player, but gives the impression that she is hiding something. GLaDOS' main weapon is psychological warfare, toying with her victims' emotions and sense of reality. When Chell reaches the maintenance rooms, she finds maddened scrawls of writing left by previous test subjects of GLaDOS.

Weighted Companion Cube (WCC): The WCC is more of a plot device than an actual character. It is an inanimate metal box with pink heart symbols painted on it. After the WCC has served its purpose in its test chamber level, GLaDOS cruelly instructs the player to 'euthanize' the box by dropping it into an incinerator. The sacrifice of the WCC serves to illustrate the inhumanity of GLaDOS: No matter how logically advanced a computer is, it cannot experience human emotion and feeling.

Breakdown

Portal has several deep ideas and metaphors below the surface of its darkly humorous story. The recurring and pervasive themes throughout the entire story are honesty and deception. These themes can be extrapolated into more complex metaphors such as religion, humanity versus technology, authoritarianism and dramaturgy. I'll elaborate on each of these concepts.

A huge part of what makes *Portal*'s story tick are the mind games that GLaDOS employs. The validity of what she says to the player ranges from fallacious and dramatically ironic to cold and unromantically truthful. For example, near the end of the game GLaDOS calls Chell an orphan with no friends; the truthfulness of that description is questionable because by that point in the story Chell has made an enemy of GLaDOS. GLaDOS frequently displays insincere emotions that are juxtaposed with her purely logical paradigm of the world. She may describe a laser as a dangerous object that will dismember the player, then say "that would be a shame" in a monotone voice dripping with apathy.

There are key elements within the story that create a metaphor for religion. GLaDOS is a perfect analogy for a god, asserting her will upon the player without having direct control or manipulation. A constant motif throughout the story is GLaDOS' promise of cake at the end as a reward for Chell's endeavors. The existence of the cake is disputable; when Chell is navigating the back rooms of the laboratory by herself, the walls are scrawled with the desperate message "The cake is a lie." The cake can be taken to mean a non-existent reward to make humanity feel good about following the rules and obeying a god. Another element of the story that resembles religion is the sacrifice of the Weighted Companion group. The scene loosely resembles the story of Abraham being

instructed by god to kill his son Ishmael, though in *Portal* the player must follow through with the murder in order to advance.

The interaction of Chell and GLaDOS is a perfect analogy for the relationship between man and technology. GLaDOS, a highly advanced and intelligent computer, represents technology at its most disturbing pinnacle. While technology such as the Handheld Portal Device advances science and quality of life, GLaDOS is analogous to a darker side of the scientific spectrum. Like nuclear or biological weapons of mass of destruction, GLaDOS is capable of enormous damage. This is clearly evident when it's revealed that she massacred everyone in the lab. GLaDOS also serves as a foil to humanity itself, making us question what it means to be human. GLaDOS' most distinctive attribute is her ability to lie, which is a very a human trait.

Similar to the religion metaphor, the dynamics of how the player reacts to GLaDOS commentates on authoritarianism and rebellion. GLaDOS is very controlling and authoritative, making Chell perform tests with a blatant disregard for Chell's safety. GLaDOS tries to keep the player controlled through vague and empty promises such as the cake. This is similar to how a tyrannical government employs propaganda to encourage its citizens to serve unquestioningly.

Perhaps the most interesting and predominant analogy is that of dramaturgy, which is an analogy for the human mind having a front and back stage. The front stage is represented by the first half of the game which is straightforward and organized, but there are hints that something is terribly wrong with the facility "behind the scenes." When Chell turns against GLaDOS, the game shifts to the backstage where the player must confront the true danger, like battling one's self-conscious demons.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Portal*'s narrative is the seamless incorporation of the story into the gameplay. Unlike many drama-based games, *Portal* does not break game immersion with its story; instead *Portal* uses it to enhance the tone of the game. See the Highlight for an example of this.

Unsuccessful Element

The sparsity of characters is one drawback to *Portal*'s narrative. There are only two characters, and the protagonist does not have a single line of dialogue. While this allows the player to step into the shoes of Chell, the story could potentially be more involving with the addition of other NPCs to interact with. It would help flesh out the back-story in ways GLaDOS cannot, since GLaDOS has a clear agenda and is a habitual liar. The game wouldn't necessarily be better simply by throwing in random NPCs, but the

short length of the game definitely leaves room for expansion.

Highlight

The highlight of the story is when GLaDOS is sending Chell into the pit of fire, leaving the player with a quandary: whether to believe GLaDOS and stay put, or escape the trap. It is a very intense moment as it marks the first time the player rebels against GLaDOS after following her will the entire game.

Critical Reception

Portal was very well received by critics, earning a 90% on Metacritic and 89% on Game Rankings, based on 21 and 27 reviews respectively. The story is especially highly regarded by critics. A few excerpts from reviews:

"*Portal* does contain linear gameplay, but the innovative new portal gameplay and humorous storyline completely make up for it. This feeling of playing a linear game also dissipates as soon as you begin your escape from certain death." - 2024.org

"One thing about Valve games is that they do a great job at for shadowing events and giving you glimpses of the overall picture before you are given the entire story at the end. They achieved this through cryptic messages in the levels, hidden areas with pictures tacked on the walls, and even a small glimpse of the final level in a level before. Valve's writers and designers really know how to be patient and give you little morsels for you to chew on while keeping you wanting more." - Gaming Nexus

Lessons

- An unobtrusive protagonist allows the player to step into the shoes of the hero more easily. This is achieved in part through minimal or no dialogue from the hero.
- Allowing the player to interact with the game world rather than relying on scripted sequences to advance the action creates deeper immersion into the story and game. For example, during the pit of lava scene, the game could have shown a sequence where Chell made some sort of escape from the conveyor belt. By letting the player escape on his or her own, the player becomes much more involved in the narrative.
- Likewise, the game could be more interesting with more choice available to the player. For example, the sacrifice of the Weighted Companion Cube could have been optional, with the

players' refusal to incinerate the box having consequences upon the player. This type of moral quandary would go well with GLaDOS' mind games, as shown in the lava pit scene.

Summation

Portal is deserving of analysis because it has many revolutionary advances in interactive storytelling. It is often described as a video game short story; like a short story, it has a relatively simple narrative architecture that explores very complex and interesting ideas.