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Thinking With Vith Portals

A Rhetorical Analysis of *Portal*

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Video games are incredibly popular. In June of 2011, the video game industry was forecast globally to take in \$65 billion that year (Baker, 2011). In twenty-some years of existence, video games have spawned an international co-culture.

The fame of such recent video games as the *Halo* and *Gears of War* series exemplify the heights to which video games can climb as financially profitable products. Similarly, developer Valve's 2007 release of *Portal* found a market niche and massive critical acclaim. With nearly 4 million copies sold (Magrino, 2011), the original *Portal* continues to be a major financial success. *Portal's* unique gameplay formula and offbeat humor have been lauded the world over, attesting to its entertainment value as well as its marketing success.

Modern video games are made with a "pick-up-and-play" mentality—that is, video game designers pay special attention to ease of play. This approach to design is an effort to sell as many copies of a game as possible. Little attention is paid on the part of the game developers to the artistic or rhetorical opportunities provided by the interactive nature of the medium. The inherent interactive nature of video games presents a unique opportunity

for artistic and persuasive expression. Unlike watching or reading one set of fictional narrative experiences with a film or a book, video games allow players to determine the progression of a fiction themselves. Some video games even allow a person to control storylines, including characters and setting, as well as entire worlds. Games like *Spore* take this notion to an extreme—in *Spore*, gameplay is centered on the creation of entire species and worlds. The malleability of video games generates potential to evoke emotion and persuade players more than other media, such as film and books.

Portal exhibits the rare ability to leave a resonating effect on players using emotional and persuasive themes. The process aspect of the game—action and consequence—holds rhetorical significance by empowering players to experience rather than observe and to invest rather than watch. *Portal's* fluent exposition of motive tendencies and emotional attachment is uncommon in the medium of video games, differentiating *Portal* from many games on the market and justifying further analysis of the game.

Two main critical frameworks are employed in this rhetorical analysis. The first framework comes from rhetorician Ian Bogost, who has published several works on the rhetoric of video games. The second is Erving Goffman's work on sociological dramaturgy. Using these two frameworks, the analysis will uncover the rhetorical significance of *Portal*.

Bogost's Possibility Space

In his essay, *The Rhetoric of Video Games* (2008), rhetorician Ian Bogost conceptualizes the "possibility space" of play in a video game (120). He refines the possibility space as "...

includ[ing] all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules.” In the case of a video game, the “set of rules” applies to the limitations of the software and hardware used to run the video game. The “gestures” are anything over which a player has any measure of control, including actions, characters, and environment. It is here, Bogost theorizes, that models of real-world processes are constructed in a video game.

For example, Bogost (2008) produced a short analysis of Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing*, articulating that the game creates “. . . a model of commerce and debt” (119) by mimicking a system of saving, expenditure, and investment of in-game monetary units. This emulation of a financially-driven system is not solely in the software, though the software lays out the aforementioned “rules”. These “rules” include the literal technological capacity of the hardware and software as well as the flow of the game as intended by its developers. Neither is the emulation only a perception on the part of the player, though the intent of the software relies on the player’s perception.

The true rhetorical dimension of the system is presented between the player and the game—in the possibility space. Likewise, the themes and persuasive facets of *Portal* are presented in its possibility space. For the purposes of this analysis, *Portal*’s possibility space contains the metaphysical connection between the player and the game. The player is persuaded to feel certain emotions and think in certain patterns by the rhetorical forces presented in the game and outlined in this analysis. Therefore, if a rhetorical artifact is to be found in analyzing *Portal*, it would be in the abstract of the possibility space.

Goffman's Dramaturgy

The other framework used in this analysis comes from the work of sociologist and rhetorician Erving Goffman. The roles of characters, motives, and settings will be expressed using Goffman's sociological dramaturgy as formulated in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman likens human presentation in society to the theatrical terms *front stage* and *backstage*, *actor*, and *audience*. Following Goffman's metaphors, a communicator (the *actor*) presents him or herself to a person or people (the *audience*) in a given environment, situation, or context (the *stage*). These simple elements form the basis of Goffman's theory of sociological dramaturgy.

Through careful performance on the stage, the actor persuades the audience to view the actor in a desirable manner. This is a holistic view of the stage. In theory, the stage is actually split in two: the *backstage* is where a performer goes but the audience does not; it is completely separate from the *front stage*. The backstage represents where the actor conceals true goals and intent. In essence, anything that the audience shouldn't see is relegated to the backstage in order to preserve the actor's dramaturgical performance. These concepts from Goffman's work will be employed in explaining the motives and intent of each notable character.

These summaries of the works of Bogost and Goffman will facilitate understanding of this rhetorical analysis by providing insight as to what is being analyzed—the content presented in the Bogost's possibility space—and how it is being analyzed—by relating the

story of *Portal* and the interactions of its constituents to Goffman's work on sociological dramaturgy.

In order to understand the overall nature of *Portal*, a brief explanation of the game's core mechanics—its gameplay—is required. "Gameplay," as it is used here, refers to the actions a player commits to achieve basic goals in the game.

General play in *Portal* is that of a puzzling game told from a first-person perspective—that is, the game is viewed and controlled from the eyes of the player-character. The player is put through a series of active "tests" that involve bending the laws of physics. A non-lethal firearm of sorts is provided to the player—this "weapon" is used for creating blue and orange inter-spatial portals (labeled "1" and "2" respectively in Figure 1) on flat planes in the closed testing courses.

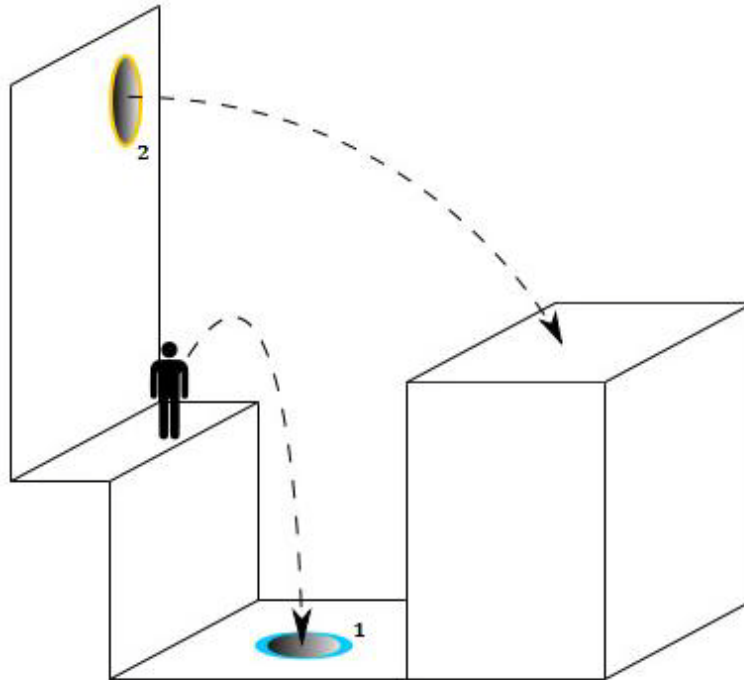


Figure 1: Illustration of *Portal's* Basic Gameplay Mechanics (Dammit, 2008).

Objects, including the player-character, can pass through one portal and out the other in a manner not unlike teleportation. In other words, whatever goes into one portal comes out the other. While gravity is a constant, the momentum of any body passing through an entry portal is carried through the exit portal. In Figure 1, the momentum generated by falling from the lower ledge into portal 1 is transferred through portal 2, allowing for travel to the upper ledge before losing momentum. These portals can then be removed and placed in other spots to progress in the testing courses. A few other gameplay mechanics also come into play, but these mechanics are the basic elements of the game.

Methods for passing through each testing chamber usually include traversing treacherous terrain or activating a switch to open a passageway to the next chamber, occasionally

utilizing the environment or other tools provided. Utilization of these portals in combination with problem-solving skills determines the player's progression through each testing chamber. This implementation of critical thinking skills also serves as a mental connection between the player and the game; the more mentally-invested the player is in the game, the more of a personal challenge it becomes. Success or failure becomes the responsibility and the stake of the player.

The role the player takes, as well as the roles of other in-game characters, heavily influence the persuasive content of the game. An understanding of the shoes into which the player is put deepens the investment of the player in the game. A brief outline of characters and their roles sets up the narrative for their motives and impressionability.

Two main characters will be discussed: Chell (the player-character) and GLaDOS (the story's antagonist). Other sentient but dependent entities (namely, sentient attack droids used by GLaDOS to impede Chell's progress) appear, but are not involved in dramatic events or dialogic exchanges and are thus negligible.

Chell

In *Portal*, players assume the role of a lab rat. The character is given a name, "Chell," and appearance (though she is rarely seen, as the game is perceived through the player-character's eyes—the only way to see Chell is to create a mirror effect using portals). No background information for Chell is supplied whatsoever. As a side-effect of being a lab rat, she has also been deprived of speech capabilities. Chell's very name may well be

metaphorical for her purpose in the story. Pronounced “shell,” the name could implicitly reference the tendency of players to place their very selves into Chell. Historyless, opinionless, voiceless, and essentially faceless, Chell leaves the player to employ a sort of psychological principle to “fill-in-the-blanks”: that of reification.

Loosely, the theory of reification involves separating out something from the original context in which it occurs and placing it in another context. In a way, reification “makes abstractions concrete” (Hart, 1978). The context in which the thing is placed usually has little to no actual connection to the original thing. Instead, the separator imposes the idea that connections do exist. In the context of *Portal*, the player is not controlling a character that is performing these actions—the player is going through these trials him- or herself.

Reification is one way that *Portal* connects players to the game. The player “fills-in” his or her own character, morals, paradigm, and self-preservation tendencies onto Chell through reification. The deeper the connection between the player and Chell, the more of a personal challenge the game becomes. The closer the player gets to Chell, the closer the player gets to everything Chell does and faces. This connection places a stress on the player to continue GLaDOS’s dramaturgy and ultimately escape from the facility.

GLaDOS

GLaDOS is the mechanical curator of the Aperture Science Enrichment Center (see “Setting”). Her name is an acronym for “Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System.” Imbued with a pseudo-human personality, GLaDOS is identified as a female by tone of voice

only. Her robotic androgyny leaves much room for reification, much like Chell's undefined persona. Again, players are persuaded to form their own perception of GLaDOS. While her actions against Chell clearly delineate her as the antagonist of the story, her intent is left unrevealed. Where is she? Where did she come from? Who created GLaDOS, and why? Almost every aspect of her role in the game is open to interpretation. It is important to note that she serves as the only sentient entity with whom Chell interacts over the course of the game. Though GLaDOS puts Chell through a series of deadly tests for no apparent reason, players are left no choice but to rely on everything GLaDOS presents—at least, until the end of the game.

Determination and dissection of motives will identify the goals each character has in the game. Furthermore, motives determine how goals affect/are affected by each character's actions and, subsequently, the story's progression.

Chell's Motives

In *Portal*, Chell's only motive is self-preservation. Unfortunately, this requires placing complete and implicit trust in GLaDOS, generally established to be the antagonist of the story. The unique nature of *Portal* forces Chell to come to terms with the fact that her only enemy is also her greatest chance of escape. Conflicting emotions of trust and distrust, desperation and preference, are exploited when examining Chell's motives.

In the Enrichment Center, Chell is completely isolated. Her aloneness forces her to be completely reliant on GLaDOS. She has no choice but to perpetuate GLaDOS's dramaturgy,

though to what end is unknown to Chell. This constraint leads Chell (and the player) to seek interaction with other parties—her uncomfortable dependence on GLaDOS has been generally established as unhealthy. The inherent human need for connection is fully exploited when a benign testing tool is given to Chell by GLaDOS. The Weighted Companion Cube’s apparent purpose is as a gameplay mechanic, but it comes to be perceived as an emotional character through anthropomorphism (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Weighted Companion Cube as it appears in *Portal* (2011).

The Aperture Science Weighted Companion Cube (Figure 2) is presented as nothing more than a tool. The heart-adorned block is often used to hold down plate switches in order to open doors through which Chell can pass. When its purpose has been served, it is to be incinerated (in order to progress in the game, the cube must be thrown into the “Emergency Intelligence Incinerator”). However, Kim Swift, level designer of *Portal*, stated in an interview that “A couple of people jumped into the incinerator themselves rather than kill the Cube” (Elliot, 2008). It has no physical characteristics of a human; it has no face,

nor any semblance thereof. So, if it is but an expendable apparatus, why is disposing of the cube so difficult?

Epley et al. (2008) propose that sociality motivation is the “fundamental need for social connection with other humans” (146). When at a lack of such connection, humans are given to perceive human traits in nonhuman objects through anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism is often recognized as the perception of physical traits, and the Companion Cube’s heart designs are the most colorful and expressive visible things in the game. But anthropomorphism is also classified by motivational traits, being the emotional tendencies of a person to an object and the perceived reciprocation from the object. The Companion Cube is an object in which are perceived motivational traits. In essence, the Companion Cube ostensibly can or cannot and does or does not feel emotion. Moreover, the player is persuaded to feel an emotional attachment to the cube, if only because there is nothing else with which to form such an attachment. GLaDOS, fitting the role of an unreliable narrator, capitalizes on this ambiguity of personality shortly after providing Chell with the Cube:

The symptoms most commonly produced by Enrichment Center testing are superstition, perceiving inanimate objects as alive, and hallucinations. The Enrichment Center reminds you that the weighted companion cube will never threaten to stab you and, in fact, cannot speak.

-GLaDOS in *Portal*

The inference of stabbing is a particularly shocking tangent that implies previous testing subjects having perceived the Cube as maleficent. After Chell inevitably destroys the Companion Cube, GLaDOS tells the player, “You euthanized your faithful companion cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Congratulations.”

Immediately after delineating the cube as non-emotionally-capable, GLaDOS refers to it as “faithful”—demeaning Chell for personifying it, and then shaming her for being so heartless as to destroy Chell’s only “friend.” Clearly, GLaDOS’s intent is to break Chell, be it mentally or physically or both. As far as rhetoric is concerned, the Companion Cube is what the player makes of it—depending on the player’s social sensitivity, the Companion Cube could either be a switch-holding block or one’s best friend. By the time comes to incinerate the block, players are meant to perceive the Companion Cube as *wanting* to not be destroyed. The cube was designed with a reliance on the player’s perception to play their emotions by anthropomorphizing, and the use of the Companion Cube in this fashion advances the psychological connection between the player and the game.

GLaDOS’s Motives

In the context of *Portal*, artificially-intelligent overseer GLaDOS (think *2001: A Space Odyssey*’s HAL-9000) is Goffman’s (1959) actress; the player is the audience; the testing chambers comprise the front stage; and GLaDOS’s maleficent intentions are left in the backstage. In his work, Goffman (1959) went on to explain mystification, a method by which “actors” utilize the backstage to obscure certain matters and highlight others. Working toward an as-yet-unknown agenda, GLaDOS emphasizes the necessity of the

testing process, but eschews any explanation of “why”. She attempts to hide the true nature of the facility as a whole. Should Chell be given the opportunity to see “the big picture,” GLaDOS’s control over Chell would soon loosen and break. Chell would be made privy to the GLaDOS’s backstage intentions, and GLaDOS’s dramaturgical performance would be finished.

Perhaps humorously, GLaDOS’s version of providing incentive to Chell is to offer her free cake if she obeys. While GLaDOS perceives this as an extremely desirable reward (who doesn’t like cake?), it gives little incentive to Chell, emphasizing not only GLaDOS’s mechanic misunderstanding of human motives, but GLaDOS’s inadequate performance as an actress in her own dramaturgy. Nevertheless, the reward of cake is referenced from the beginning of the game well into the ending, and is one of the most cited sources of humor in the game. While the cake is employed mainly for comic relief, it is a vital part of GLaDOS’s ineffective dramaturgy.

Social Effect On/Of Motive Through (Inter)Action

With a firm understanding of the game’s characters (and the role of the player) now established, examination of motives further reveals the rhetorical capacity of *Portal*. Based only on descriptions of Chell and GLaDOS and the sociological context in which they interact, already the game constructs motives for each character. According to philosopher John Dewey, “An element in an act viewed as a tendency to produce such and such consequences is a motive” (1922). Construction and deconstruction of these motives

through rhetoric serves as the basis for interaction between Chell and GLaDOS and strengthens their protagonist/antagonist relationship.

As discussed in the character description, motive, and language sections, GLaDOS attempts to construct a motive for Chell—her paradigm as a “lab rat”. Chell refutes this construct and simultaneously deconstructs the motive GLaDOS constructed and constructs her own—that of the autonomous, protagonist actress rebelling against the tyrannical forces of GLaDOS. Chell transcends the motive constructed for her and replaces it with her own. This construction and deconstruction of motives only further exemplifies the rhetorical nature of *Portal*; given the basic guidelines of “good” (Chell) and “bad” (GLaDOS), the player is persuaded to take the reins and develop Chell’s motive for themselves.

In reference to rhetorical relevance, language lies next to motives in terms of persuasive capacity. Interestingly, Chell’s refraining from using language actually supports her role of a reified shell—without hearing them, players can formulate for themselves Chell’s thoughts and intentions, strengthening the reified connection between the player and the game. Conversely, what GLaDOS says is always meant to augment or diminish the significance of the current situation in her favor, and deception is her forté.

Chell’s Use of Language

As stated, Chell’s use of language is literally nonexistent. The only sounds that emanate from Chell are the occasional grunts of pain due to falling from a great height or being fired upon. Her lack of speech capabilities allows the player a greater connection to Chell by not

imposing a concrete, formulated identity on Chell, while at the same time demonstrating the desperate loneliness of her situation. She is constantly pestered and led astray by GLaDOS, ever the unreliable narrator.

GLaDOS's Use of Language

Obviously, GLaDOS's use of language is far more articulate and persuasive than Chell's. GLaDOS's robotic monotone almost has a coddling tone to it, bending the player's emotions almost toward an appreciation for GLaDOS's presence. Though the vast majority of the things GLaDOS says are lies (for example, she will often refer to herself in the plural "we" to give Chell the impression of multiple employees at the Enrichment Center, utilizing deception again to mask her backstage secrets), they are literally the only words spoken throughout the course of the game.

Passive-aggressive verbal abuse is another common element in GLaDOS's use of language. Of note is the fact that GLaDOS never calls Chell by name. Always speaking to Chell in the first person, GLaDOS is able to dehumanize and demean Chell by referring to her as a "test subject". According to GLaDOS's dramaturgy, Chell should be passive and malleable, rather than questioning and resistant. Again, this perception of Chell's character, even extrinsically, allows the player a closer connection to the narrative and, thus, a closer connection to Chell.

In particular, GLaDOS's verbal insults toward Chell include debasement on the basis of Chell's weight, intelligence, and the very legitimacy of her birth. As GLaDOS says during the final confrontation with Chell (a battle ultimately lost by GLaDOS),

There was even going to be a party for you. A big party, that all of your friends were invited to. I invited your best friend, the Companion Cube. Of course, he couldn't come, because you murdered him. All your other friends couldn't come either, because you don't have any other friends because of how unlikable you are. It says so right here in your personnel file; 'Unlikable. Liked by no one. A bitter unlikable loner whose passing shall not be mourned.' SHALL NOT BE MOURNED. That's exactly what it says. Very formal. Very official. It also says you were adopted. So that's funny too.

-GLaDOS in *Portal*

Separated from the context, this passage alone conveys a great deal of poorly-masked contempt. Completely unrelated to plot, the quote buzzes with resentment not only for Chell, but for the player—remember that, for all intents and purposes, the player *is* Chell.

The role of GLaDOS as test administrator to Chell being a test subject becomes weaker as Chell defies GLaDOS over the course of the game. As the game starts out, GLaDOS has complete control over Chell, ultimately assuming that Chell will not see through her dramaturgic disguise. As Chell progresses through the test chambers, GLaDOS's grip weakens, forcing GLaDOS into an openly-hostile relationship with Chell. Also from the final confrontation, in which GLaDOS perceives her control over Chell as entirely broken:

I can't shut off the turret defenses. Oh well. If you want my advice, you should just lie down in front of a rocket. Trust me. It will be a lot less painful than the neurotoxin. All right. Keep doing whatever it is you think you're doing. Killing you and giving you good advice aren't mutually exclusive. The rocket really is the way to go.

-GLaDOS in *Portal*

By this point in the game, GLaDOS has failed to convince Chell of her role as actress—all pretense of her dramaturgy has been shattered.

The game's setting, being the known environmental and aesthetic stimuli, also has weight on GLaDOS's dramaturgy and Chell's determination to (and means by which to) defy GLaDOS's dramaturgical tyranny. Despite its quotidian appearance, the environment seems unnatural and ostensibly hostile from the beginning of the game and remain so throughout the game. Sinister intentions surface when GLaDOS cordially welcomes Chell to her establishment:

Hello and again welcome to the Aperture Science Computer-Aided Enrichment Center. We hope your brief detention in the relaxation vault has been a pleasant one. Your specimen has been processed and we are now ready to begin the test proper. Before we start, however, keep in mind that although fun and learning are the primary goals of the enrichment center activities, serious injuries may occur.

-GLaDOS in *Portal*

The Enrichment Center's oppressively-bleak environment is entirely unadorned; grey walls, ceilings, and floors make up the environment throughout the game. Aberrations to this monotony form an important hole in GLaDOS's dramaturgy.

GLaDOS believes that if she can keep Chell confined to the closed testing courses, all will proceed according to her plan (to study and dispose of test subjects). Unfortunately for GLaDOS, there are multiple occurrences in which Chell finds hidden areas made accessible by past test subjects. Wall panels have been torn away in certain test chambers, revealing apparent hideouts of test subjects that disobeyed GLaDOS in the past. Suspicions of sinister intent, if not already apparent, are confirmed by the fact that there are no other people to be found in the Enrichment Center—apparently, they have all been used and disposed of. Weighted Companion Cubes litter some of these hidden alcoves, providing once again the sense of emotional attachment to the cube. Erratic messages are written on the walls, most discouraging readers from obeying GLaDOS's orders.

A common theme among these writings is the absence of GLaDOS's primary incentive—cake. "The cake is a lie" is seen frantically scribbled in almost all of these areas, attesting to the common psychological toll the incentive has taken on past test subjects.

In conclusion, *Portal* is, by definition, a video game, with all of the positive and negative connotations the name may conjure. But it does something that few other games have: it exploits textbook psychological theories and rhetorical principles to make players emotionally-sensitive toward the content in the game. It persuades the player to have a

stake in the outcome, to form attachments to characters, and to truly put themselves in another's shoes. These are results of story-telling for which writers, directors, and artists in almost every other field strive. The employment of these themes in video games is rare and unexpected, but *Portal* proves their effectiveness. *Portal* takes players away from their accustomed "observer" viewpoints and directly appeals to their emotional tendencies to produce persuasive effects. Video games like *Portal* allow for a deeper, more impressionable narrative in story-telling by adapting established rhetorical theories in a modern context.

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