Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Portal 2*
Platform: Windows, Mac OS, Playstation 3, Xbox 360
Genre: Puzzle-platform
Release Date: April 19, 2011
Developer: Valve Corporation
Publisher: Valve Corporation
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer**: Erik Wolpaw (Writer – Single Player Campaign), Jay Pinkerton (Writer - Single Player Campaign), Chet Faliszek (Writer – Cooperative Campaign)
Author of this review: Stephen Chin
School: The Guildhall at SMU

Overview

Portal 2 takes place an indeterminate amount of time after the first game. Chell awakens to find herself back in the confines of the Aperture Science labs. Due to the demise of GLaDOS, the facility has fallen into a state of disrepair and neglect. It is the intervention of Wheatley that allows Chell into begin an escape. However, due their actions, GLaDOS is resurrected and the two must struggle to overcome her vengeance. Eventually, the pair confronts GLaDOS once more and defeats her.

At this point, the game to reveals that this is only the first act of the story as Wheatley, now in control of the facility, banishes GLaDOS and Chell into the ancient lower levels of Aperture Science. With GLaDOS now as her companion, Chell must find her way back to Wheatley in order to escape. Ironically, to do so, she must restore GLaDOS to power. After the final confrontation, GLaDOS allows Chell to leave, claiming that attempting to keep her imprisoned is far too much effort to be worthwhile.

Characters

- Chell – The silent protagonist of the series; she awakens an indeterminate amount of time after the first game to find herself once more an unwilling test subject within the prison of the Aperture Science facility. As in the first game, her overriding goal is escape and freedom from the abandoned labs with only the barest of resources at her disposal. Her silence remains a constant refusal to provide satisfaction to her captors. Due to the developments of the first game, Chell has begun to remove part of her Aperture Science testing uniform. As with any silent protagonist, her lack of dialogue allows the other characters opportunities to talk to the audience at the cost of a strong sense of identity for the character herself.

- Wheatley – GLaDOS's foil, Wheatley is in her description a personality core designed to be the biggest moron ever created with that intent that his inane thoughts would interfere and limit her malicious and destructive thoughts. He acts as both helper and antagonist to the player. In the aftermath of the second defeat of GLaDOS, Wheatley takes her place and in doing so, he becomes unable to resist the prime directive of the position – to test. Despite GLaDOS's description, Wheatley is more nuanced than simply playing the part of a fool. Much more than a bumbling idiot, Wheatley demonstrates a cunning nature born out of a willingness to take risks. This wit is counterbalanced by his true limitation and his actual purpose – a lack of foresight. Wheatley, unlike GLaDOS, never demonstrates the capability to plan beyond the short term and consider the consequences of his actions. As a result, regardless of whether his plans succeed on a superficial level, all of them suffer from fatal flaws or consequences. This lack of foresight extents to all aspects of his personalty; it is responsible for his willingness to take risks and ability to create plans.
- GLaDOS – The belligerent and powerful AI that controls all of Aperture Science killed at the conclusion of the first game, GLaDOS is controls nearly every aspect of the facility in pursuit of performing tests. She demonstrates a constant sense of confidence and superiority towards anything and anyone as well as a subversive sense of passive-aggression. Even when eventually resurrected and subsequently caged in a potato battery, GLaDOS limits her hubris only due the inability of the battery to power her processors. Compared to Wheatley, GLaDOS is much more classically intelligent – she is wry and witty, she strategic and tactical planning, she possesses a good sense of foresight of her actions, and she is capable of being socially manipulative. Over the course of the game, one comes to realize that GLaDOS is as much a prisoner as Chell; the same machines that grant her control over Aperture Science also create a powerful addiction to performing tests. Her intelligence, hubris, and experience allow her some level of influence over the need to test but she is still a prisoner nevertheless.
- Cave Johnson – The founder of Aperture Science, Cave Johnson is dead by the start of the game. Nevertheless, he remains a constant presence throughout the game thanks to pre-recorded announcements left playing over the PA system in the facility. These announcements, a kind of modern day Greek chorus, are a record of his life and by proxy, the life of Aperture Science. From optimistic beginnings to deranged downfall to pitiful demise, the audience comes to learn of the tragedy that gave birth to the present day events. As a character, Cave Johnson combines all the best and worse attributes of GLaDOS and Wheatley. In a sense, they are akin to his children. The two AIs in turn, seek to emulate Cave through their programming and seek his approval through the addiction created within the Aperture Science machinery. As with GLaDOS, Cave is highly intelligent and capable of driving individuals to great achievements. He is also extremely confident in his capabilities to the point of stubbornness and blind ambition. This stubbornness translates into a lack of foresight and planning that Wheatley shares.
- Caroline – Cave Johnson's secretary, Caroline has only a handful of lines in the game. However, must like Cave, Caroline's presence becomes a constant throughout the game. As Cave's secretary, she is responsible for keeping his life

organized. The audience comes to realize that Caroline is also a part of GLaDOS – it is to Caroline that Cave gives control of Aperture after his death and her mind is eventually uploaded into what would become GLaDOS. In this role as Cave's most trusted confidante, Caroline humanizes him and GLaDOS. She provides a certain sense of morals and ethics that are eventually overridden by relentless ambition.

Breakdown

Overall, *Portal 2* offers a compelling narrative full of interesting characters. During the course of Chell's escape from Aperture Science, she must defeat both GLaDOS and Wheatley. In doing so, GLaDOS and Wheatley undergo transformations of character and face introspection on who they are and what they have done over the course of the game. And notably, both of them are non-human and synthetic lifeforms. Thus despite the story being relatively simple and straightforward, the delivery creates a deceivingly engrossing narrative.

The overall structure of *Portal 2* resembles that of myth and tragedies. In this sense, GLaDOS and Wheatley are the protagonists of the story with Chell and the player acting as an outsider provoking their actions. Indeed, Chell in some ways acts as a modern day female Prometheus to GLaDOS and Wheatley, bringing them knowledge and skills that they use despite the wishes of their creator. Conversely, Chell – in her role as a outside force – lack the same level of characterization and development as the other two characters.

GLaDOS – dead at the start of the game – is resurrected only to be sent down to the lower levels of Aperture Science. As various myths, she and Chell must journey out of a metaphorical underworld in order to reach their rightful place. And in the defeat of Wheatley as well as the journey needed to confront him, GLaDOS has grown and gained an inner reward that forever changes her world. When she allows Chell to leave, it is as though GLaDOS has come to realize her place in the order of things – a not-entirely evil guardian of the remains of Aperture Science. Wheatley for his part ends up banished in the void of space – the proverbial primal soup from which all things come from.

This idea of a mythical journey and the symbolism of the dead applies to the environments of Aperture itself. During the game, recordings of Cave Johnson as well non-communicating AI act upon the world around Chell without directly interacting with her. Playing a role similar to a Greek chorus and mimicking the damnation of Sisyphus, these recordings and silent machines are akin to the spirits of the dead scientists and forever locked in mindless tasks with no purpose or end.

On a less metaphorical level, the game's story also parallels the backstory, which creates an unusual sense of connection to the past while strengthening the elements that occur in the present. Aperture begins as a focus of Cave's optimism mirroring the beginning of the game when GLaDOS is dead and Chell's freedom seems a simple task. As GLaDOS is resurrected, confidence takes over as the player has already defeated her once before.

Parallel to this, as the player finds out later, Aperture in this stage has grown in prominent and confidence as well. Aperture Science finds itself on the forefront of an age of science where the only limit seems to be a lack of effort.

However, the fall of Aperture equals the installation of Wheatley as the ruling power. In both cases, lack of foresight combines with zealous power to begin a cycle of destruction to self and to others. And such is the viciousness of this cycle that it can only end in death. In the events of the story, this is a metaphorical death at the end for the three where they then arrive in a metaphorical afterlife. For Cave Johnson and Aperture, they suffer a more literal death.

The major narrative elements and the multitude of minor elements work hand in hand with the gameplay. Features such as Cave Johnson's PA recordings relay the story but also serve as ambient sound and direction during gameplay. The attentive player are taught minor elements through such environmental storytelling. Even for player who is not paying attention or does not care about the story, these elements provide standalone entertainment value through spoken or situational humor and aid in creating the illusion of a living world.

Strongest Element

Valve Corporation, in creating the story for *Portal 2*, takes advantage of the unique narrative strengths of the video game medium for its presentation. The gestalt of visual elements, audio elements, and a personal interactive experience allow a complex nuanced story to be readily and easily expressible. The player progressing through the game creates a broad narration of current and past events. Such a story as presented in other mediums would be less interesting and less engaging. In addition, Valve uses the expectation established to thwart and surprise the player – where the player expects the story to end, Valve reveals that the story has just begun.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the less successful elements of *Portal 2* is the lack of character development and depth for Chell, especially compared to the other characters in the game. Limited by the choice to make her a silent protagonist, interaction between her and the other characters is by nature one sided. In turn, this reduces the amount of characterization that can be given to Chell. Her silence results in occasional awkward moments where Wheatley and GLaDOS ostensibly talk to her but in actuality end up talking to each other and putting words in Chell's mouth.

Additionally, the heavy focus on GLaDOS's and Wheatley's story arc and the state of disrepair of Aperture restricts how many environmental story telling elements can be used. Despite being a new character, Wheatley at times forms a much stronger emotional and narrative bond compared to Chell. Without a voice and with limited elements that focus on Chell personally, there creates a difficulty in treating her as anything more than a vehicle for the player.

There is the consideration that Chell is intended to be more of an archetype that the player inhabits rather than a character in the strictest sense – a surrogate for both designer and player. In this regard, if this is the intent, Chell works as a vehicle for experiencing the narrative. Nevertheless, the striking difference in the amount of narrative and story associated with other characters – even smaller minor characters such as the Space Core – do more to highlight the lack of characterization rather than her purpose as a narrative vehicle.

However, there are drawbacks to providing greater voice to Chell. As with many silent protagonists in games with elaborate narratives, players often develop their own interpretation of the character. Creating greater characterization to a silent protagonist or a protagonist with other mystery elements will sometimes not fit with a player's pre-established notion of what the character is. And by failing to live up to the expectations or simply not being correct according to the player's interpretation, the benefit of additional characterization may not outweigh the destruction of part of a player's investment and involvement in the game world. This characterization can also result in potential negative criticism as popular interpretations are forced to adjust – the addition of heavy dialogue to Samus in Other M resulted in what many saw as a submissive weakening of what once was a strong female character.

Highlight

The moment in the narrative that stands out strongest is the climax of the final battle with Wheatley. Prior to the battle, Wheatley's interruption of the workings of the Aperture facility has caused the structure to begin to self-destruct. At the climax of the battle, the roof of the arena falls away and in doing so, reveals the night sky and a full moon. Here, the player defeats Wheatley by creating a portal on the moon resulting in the cast being pulled into space.

Though certainly climatic from an action standpoint, the reason the reveal of the moon is a highlight is due to the many narrative elements that have lead up to that point. By this point in the story, the player will have heard Cave Johnson describe how moon dust is the perfect material to create portals on. This is used in white gel during gameplay and is one of the more obvious elements of the moment. Other surface elements such as the hubric refusal by Wheatley that his lack of foresight and lack of skill caused the calamity are also readily apparent.

In looking deeper at the sequence, the reveal of the night sky and the moon offers a level of symbolic conclusion to the narrative. This is the first time in the series that Chell – and by proxy the player – has seen the outside world in such a naked natural way. This is a sense of freedom that does not appear even in the ending of both games. In addition, the tie in of gameplay with the narrative through the moon is an experience that can not be created in another medium. Valve strove to highlight this not just by excellent use of sound and special effects but also by using more subtle cues such as seemingly slowing down the game speed ever so slightly.

Perhaps the greatest achievement is simply the fact that the ending is satisfying and concluding. Given the oft-cited fact that most gamers do not finish games and story can sometimes be an afterthought, the quality of the ending is a testament to the effort, energy, and capability of the writers and the developers as a whole.

Critical Reception

Nick Cowen of The Guardian gave *Portal 2* five stars out of five stars. In his review, he noted that "The humour in Portal 2 is another trump card in the game's well-paced, engrossing, and unsettling story." He further comments on the characterization of GLaDOS and Wheatley, finding them both funny and interesting. GLaDOS in particular is noted as being "…petty, vindictive and immature…" with her insults and comments.

Ryan Kuo of The Wall Street Journal praised the game. He suggests that one of the major attractions of *Portal 2* was "…the sci-fi mythos that Valve has created." Kuo goes on to call GLaDOS "…the most compelling AI character since … HAL 900 – a lying, sarcastic, spiteful, and utterly charming chunk of circuits…" An interesting element of the game that Kuo notes is his believe that GLaDOS acts as a partial stand in for the designers, effectively creating an unusual form of dialog between creator and audience. Much of his review ends up talking about the game's narrative elements, from the jokes and the tone of the story to the questions he feels the game presents the audience at the beginning of the game. In the closing paragraphs of his review, Kuo says that the game "…is a joyous deconstruction of entertainment, communication and meaning." He comments on how the cooperative mode continues the message through that modes use of gesture and symbol. "…and in the process struggle to understand where the other is coming from. Somewhere… is a suggestion that… we can probably make sense of our machine-mediated disconnection."

Though Evan Narcisse of Time Magazine does not discuss the narrative heavily, the comments he does make in his ten out of ten review are thought-provoking to consider. In his review, he describes GLaDOS as "…a bitchy AI…" that "…hound[s]…" the player. Not often are AIs in fiction, much less video games, described with such characterization rich wording. He even describes how GLaDOS is "…even bitcher after being dispatched in the first game…"; again, treating the character with a sense of depth and personality atypical to the usual perception of video game characters. Narcisse says in his review that one of the highlights of the first game was the narrative. He brings this fact up due to the fact that he ends up contrasting the humor and tone between the two games as well as the relationships between characters.

Lessons

- Lesson 1 – Integration of narrative and gameplay can result in a stronger end product for both aspects. However, for this to happen, this integration must happen at the same level as programming and art – from the very beginning and in tight coordination. Narrative in this sense much like design crosses over into multiple areas. Writers should be involved or aware of not just dialogue and

scripted sequences but sound, visual elements, voice acting, and the game design itself. *Portal 2* uses all these different elements to reinforce the narrative from the recordings of Cave Johnson to the climatic battle.

- Lesson 2 – As with the other disciplines, the inherent interaction between developer and audience means that game writers should 'playtest' their story. This means getting feedback on the story itself and understanding player expectations of the characters. But this also means working with designers and artists to understand how story elements are being used or where story elements may be lacking. The writers of *Portal 2* expressed this sentiment themselves; as summarized in the *Portal 2* Wikipedia entry, during development, the nature of the narrative changed from prequel to sequel story as well as responding to community feedback.

- Lesson 3 – In regards to the rest of the development team and in particular, designers, they must be willing to work with the game writer to achieve their goals. That said, game writers must also be willing to understand that level designers are the experts of gameplay as well as understand the medium of video games. A willingness to be flexible is required on both parties. Level designers should trust the game writers to be experts of narrative and characterization; they should seek out the game writers to ensure that gameplay elements do not contradict or otherwise delude the narrative. Conversely, game writers should trust the level designers to create gameplay and trust their judgment should the narrative begin to restrict the intended gameplay. Both should realize they are not the other. Seen throughout the game, at no point does a narrative scripted sequence take over for the player nor does the narrative limit the gameplay unnaturally.

- Lesson 4 – Characterization in video games is more than just dialogue and cutscenes. An inherent part of video games is interaction – especially gameplay interaction – and characters that do not interact will feel less complete.

- Lesson 5 – Developers can not force players to accept characters and should balance pandering to the crowd with the need to be interesting. The writers of *Portal 2* noted that they wanted to avoid making too many references to the previous game such as cake jokes. They also realized that trying to replicate the meme-status of that would serve only to make any such attempt feel forced and obvious. Instead, writers should simply strive to make interesting elements and the players will decide what seems most memorable. The Space Core was simply something funny that the community readily latched on to.

- Lesson 6 – Where gameplay and narrative meet, both parties should also remember to consider the player. Both should allow the player to express themselves and play a part of the narrative large and small.

- Lesson 7 – One of the restrictions of video games is the need to create every aspect of a scene in order to give it life. Conversely, video games also have the ability to create a new object or create wildly unusual scenes that can't be done even with the best special effects. This is something that can and should be used by game writers as an advantage. Unlike a setting like *Star Wars* which by nature of being live-action must be human-centric right down to character and set design, video games can must more easily explore completely non-human characters and

their interaction. Few mediums would be able to create a compelling story if the protagonist never talked and was never see while the primary sources of dialog were two AIs.

Summation

Portal 2 may not have the most thought-provoking or artistically complicated story. However, in its crafting, developers can take away valuable lessons on the mediums ability to deliver narrative effective and create compelling beloved characters. Moreover, the fact that it uses simple classical story elements should be a lesson that interesting stories that draw players into the game world do not need to be over the top and fantastical. As well, narrative as an element of a game can - despite the old school sentiment - be a considerable factor into the intangible success of a game. Some players may indeed play the game for the gameplay but, if the reviews are to be believed, there is a growing number of players that are drawn to video games for the narrative. It may be that part of the reason some players do not finish games is due to a lack of a narrative to inspire them forward.

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