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Portal Still Alive and Portal 2:

Lessons from Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

By

Lisa Josefina Yamasaki

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Portal Still Alive and Portal 2:  
Lessons from Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy

By

Lisa Josefina Yamasaki

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Douglas M. Kellner, Chair

Due to the increasing popularity of video games in mass media culture, I will be investigating one particular video game series, *Portal: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*, and the manner by which players learn from them. After observing that most instructors use these games in physics and math classes, I want to expand more on the way that video games enact a new storytelling feature through experiential means, which also serves a pedagogical function. I assert that players learn from games through their interactive gameplay, which allows them to engage with the game narrative that contains ideological content embedded through portrayal of characters, plot development, use of imagery and text, and thematic development. Thus, I develop my model of video game literacy through interactivity with a game narrative.

My model, Critical Narrative Gaming Literacy, provides a construction of game narrative comprising of thematic development as the central component encompassing the development of the other narrative elements such as plot, character, use of symbols, setting, and point of view. A

new form of Cultural Studies that incorporates the study of video games, Critical Narrative Gaming Literacy is informed by theorizations in Cultural Studies, Critical Pedagogy, and Psychoanalysis as articulated in Literacy Theory. In my analysis of the game series, I investigate the narrative using a means of comparison to Jacques Lacan's reading of *Antigone* and examine themes of the sublimated death drive, violence, and sado-masochism, since I experienced those themes manifesting through plot and character development and the use of symbols. Due to the interactive nature of video games and variability in gameplay, I also capture the manner by which undergraduate players experience the narratives differently from each other. Thus, taking a phenomenological approach to data collection through 13 interviews with 13 different participants, I narrow my focus on 5 different participants' experiences of the game series. These participants express their experiences of the game series as revealing a mother-daughter relationship and a cautionary tale of science and power.

The following dissertation of Lisa Josefina Yamasaki is approved.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my two nieces, Carisa Joyner and Sofia “Fifi” Joyner, whose curiosity about different aspects of my work inspires me to continue my scholarship. Carisa, I admire your eagerness to learn and achieve beyond your expectations—in a lot of ways, I have done just that in my research and in writing this dissertation. Fifi, I admire your ability to perfect your game playing techniques and admiration for French culture—also two components in my work, especially in my dissertation. May you two see that playfulness mediates between the sensuous and intellect, thus making it an essential part of scholarship.

I also dedicate this dissertation to future scholars interested in similar research, especially those who find themselves in liminal stances due to being between polarities (i.e. being a mixed race scholar who uses European concepts or being a female scholar who studies predominantly male gamer interactions). My dissertation is a testament that one can use this liminality to develop new ideas and a fresh perspective.

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## *Chapter I.*

### *Introduction*

According to the Entertainment Software Association 2012 annual report, 16.6 billion dollars was spent on computer and video game purchases in the United States. In addition, the average household has at least one gaming device: a console, smartphone, or computer (ESA, 2012). Partaking in occasional gameplay as a form of leisurely work, I can personally attest to the current popularity in videogames. One of my favorite choices is the Portal game series, comprising *Portal: Still Alive* and its sequel, *Portal 2* (Valve Software). In addition to its challenging puzzles, it is the only popular game of which I am aware that features a biracial female protagonist. Considering its popularity among different gamers, who unanimously referenced it in casual conversation, I decided to interrogate other opinions of the game, such as game critics.

Portal 2 has its website that lists its accolades and game awards. The game won at least 27 awards for Best Game or Top Game of 2011. Some game organizations, such as X-Plays, awarded it “Best Puzzle Game,” while Spike’s TV Videogame Awards gave it “Best Performance by a Human Female.” I was amazed to find that IGN awarded it “Best Story” for at least 2 game consoles: the PC computer and the Xbox 360 ([www.thinkwithportals.com](http://www.thinkwithportals.com)). Initially, I considered that Valve Software, the creators of the game, were attempting to convince gamers of the value of Portal 2, so I decided to look at other game critiques that describe the positive and negative features of the game. According to Metacritic, a website that lists different video game critics, the videogame, *Portal 2* (Valve Software), was awarded 3<sup>rd</sup> place in

the Best Videogame of 2011 (Metacritic, 2011). Scoring a 95 out of 100 points, *Portal 2* was lauded for its mind-boggling puzzles, vivid graphics, witty characters and story writing, and brilliant voice acting (Metacritic, 2011).

I noticed the words “innovative gameplay” and “witty new characters” reoccur, especially in *Portal 2* critiques that awarded the game a 95-100% or A to A+ grade. Yet, each game critique referenced how *Portal 2* surpassed the gameplay experience and story writing of the first game, *Portal: Still Alive*. After noting that *Portal: Still Alive* had fewer critiques than its successor, I examined them and noted its high score as well. While Valve Software did not list awards for *Portal: Still Alive*, the game received a high score of 90% or an A- grade on Metacritic (Metacritic, 2008). Some critics stated that the gameplay compelled players due to its vivid graphics and sardonic antagonist, GLaDOS, a female master computer who taunts and teases the player as she embodies the protagonist through gameplay (Geddes, 2008). Furthermore, *Portal: Still Alive* introduced a new catchphrase in mass media culture with the meme, “The cake is a lie,” thus demonstrating its significance among many gamers. Given the popularity of both games, I want to investigate a unique intersection between its cultural relevance in mass media culture and its educational significance. Games in educational contexts develops critical literacies both in context of reinforcing core curriculum (see Gee, 2007, 2009; Squire, 2002, 2008; Konzack, 2009) and in terms of developing literary procedural literacy, or a type of literacy where the games function as metaphorical content for real world situations (see Bogost, 2007; Devane and Squire 2008) as explained in Section I.VI in this chapter. In the next section, I will briefly explain its use in educational contexts, and I argue that the games possess an inherent educational value in its story.

### *I.I. Statement of the Problem: Description of the Portal Series*

In order to understand the relevance of the Portal games, it is necessary to briefly describe both games. After I describe the gameplay and provide a brief summary of the story, I indicate its current use in different K-12 and University classroom settings.

Valve Software Corporation created the Portal series game—their only series not involving war and military scenarios. *Portal* and *Portal 2* are part of a puzzle video game genre in the first person perspective. The Portal series is available to play on different platform or game consoles, a technical term for a video game playing device. Examples of game consoles are the Sony PlayStation, Xbox, Wii, and PC computer systems. Depending on the game operating system, there are different buttons to activate a move. The most common actions in the game include moving forward, falling, and portal shooting. The first person perspective simply means that the game player directly sees the game environment through the eyes of the playable game character. Similar to the literary and cinematic tropes of the first person perspective, the game player experiences the protagonist's troubles and successes.

In the games, players play as Chell, the mute dark-haired protagonist of the game. She is modeled after a model and actress, who is part Brazilian and part Japanese, thus giving her a mixed race look. She is slender, attractive, young, and seemingly athletic. Chell is depicted as having dark hair and average height (5'6"). Any descriptions of her personality derive from her interactions with puzzles, which is channeled through different players, and interactions with the other characters. GLaDOS is the artificial intelligence that initially appears robotic and minimally present to greet Chell before and after puzzle completion. Only after the later puzzles and the last test chamber reveal her true intentions for Chell. The chambers and hidden

chambers, some of which are the Rattman<sup>1</sup> dens, reveal Chell's personality through the inscriptions on the walls. The player has to attain two portal devices: blue and orange. The portals function as entry and exit points that form a hallway between these two points. The player/Chell initially attains the blue portal device then the orange. In *Portal: Still Alive*, the player as Chell solves the puzzle and learns different techniques such as the portal device, momentum falling, killing turrets<sup>2</sup>, and falling while shooting portals.

The game is a test-taker's journey into an abandoned science lab. All the other scientists are gone, and the only sentient beings are robots. There is one person, Rattman, besides Chell, who is human and is battling his life against GLaDOS. After Chell solves each puzzle, GLaDOS seems pleased, but the ending of chamber 19 makes her goal evident—she wants to kill Chell because there is no need for her, or she wants to ensure that she will find a way out. Throughout the game, Chell's determination and tenacity sparks GLaDOS' interest in her. So, at the end, when she offers cake, she really only means to offer death or another incentive for living, but her own willingness to push Chell leads to GLaDOS' destruction. The setting seems rather sterile, until one gets to the scenes where Chell is escaping behind the test chambers. The contrast between the back of the center and the test chambers symbolize the contrast in what GLaDOS says and means. She may state cake, but she really means death. The feeling of being watched by no one is more daunting than being watched by a few people. The empty desks and erratic computer stations make it appear that the rooms were abandoned in a hurry, a visual detail that heightens the player's sense of doom. Furthermore it is ironic that death is always evaded in

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<sup>1</sup> Rattman is a mad-scientist character, who leaves behind a series of drawings that help the player/Chell escape and add an underlying narrative feature to the game. Also, the "Rattman dens" are considered Easter Eggs, those hidden parts of video games discovered by hardcore players.

<sup>2</sup> Turrets are little military and guard robots that shoot whenever Chell comes within their view. They create obstacles for the player/Chell yet comedic relief when they utter painful expressions when shot. Standing on three legs, they also have an oblong shape and a red circle in the middle of their body.

pursuit of life in a setting that is lifeless. For instance, the sentient beings have life, but they evince liveliness and humor, traits that are considered human. Nearing the conclusion of the game, GLaDOS refers to having her heart broken by Chell. Thus, it seems that her ability to solve tests and persevere endear Chell to GLaDOS, so it makes her feel somewhat amorous towards her. Yet, it gets threatened when GLaDOS tries to kill her. It is significant to note that between the first and second games, the apocalypse occurred, a fact referenced if the player looks at the computer screens in *Portal 2*. Testing procedures are still operable, so the player can solve the puzzles even though it is implied that the outside world is destroyed.

In *Portal 2*, the narrative is more developed, causing players to learn more about the characters as well as being introduced into new ones. For example, GLaDOS' identity becomes unveiled through her reincarnated forms as a robot, memory of a human, and a potato. Through a depiction of murals, Chell's bravery is depicted through the gaze of the Rattman whose adoration of her depicts her in an admirable way. Even the turrets are perceived as more than simply military robots that ruthlessly shoot anyone who moves in front of them. For instance, there is one turret players perceive in different scenes in the game, which asserts that she differs from the rest of her peers. Another feature of the game is the experience of learning the history of the Aperture Science Center and Cave Johnson through the exploration of the center. The introduction of the new antagonist, Wheatley, helps form a partnership between GLaDOS and Chell, who must eradicate Wheatley from destroying them and the facility.

Since the *Portal* series is a puzzle genre, the main objective is to solve puzzles by shooting portals or doors from one end of the room to another. In this game, portals function like entry and exit points that form a hallway between these two points. For instance a player shoots a blue portal for the entry and an orange portal for the exit, so the player expects to walk into the

blue portal and exit out of the orange portal. Sometimes there are obstacles that block the player from rendering a task. For example, in one chamber or game room, there is a gap in the middle of the room that blocks the player from simply walking to the other side of the room. A solution is to shoot the portal gun, creating an entry door, on the player's side of the gap and then to shoot the portal gun to other side of gap, creating an exit door. The player walks in the portal closest to her and finds herself at the other side of the room. She creates doorways to traverse the game area, but only two doors can be placed at any given time. As the player navigates through harder levels of the game, the puzzles become much more difficult. For instance, the player can only create two doors or portals on white surfaces. The gameplay consists of different rooms in which puzzles must be solved before exiting to the next room. There are different hindrances in the forms of turret robots, laser beams, fire pellets, and poisonous liquid that deter the player from the exit, yet, a favorable aspect of the game is that each puzzle builds on the previous puzzle from the earlier rooms. In other words, if the player successfully learns to solve a puzzle in Chamber Room 4, it is very likely that those skills will transfer to solutions for much harder puzzles in later rooms. Sometimes the game presents timed obstacles, which involve rendering a combination of tasks in a timely manner.

Another way to look at the game is through its narrative. In the first game of the series, the player, as the protagonist, awakens in a small resting chamber consisting of a bed, toilet, microwave, coffee cup, clipboard, and a radio. When a doorway or portal is created by the laboratory operating system, the player experiences one of the few opportunities to see the protagonist. Unlike most video games, the protagonist is a slender dark-haired woman, Chell, dressed in a white tank top and orange sweatpants. Shortly after, the player proceeds in a succession of puzzles in different chambers.

Throughout the 19 different chambers, the player follows a series of taunts and comments from GLaDOS, the laboratory main operating system. It should be noted that GLaDOS offers the reward of cake after the test completion, or the completion of 19 different test chambers. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> chamber, however, Chell is led to an open fire pit. Instead of cake, GLaDOS taunts Chell with being burned alive. At the game's conclusion, she is led to the fire by a conveyor belt, thus creating a dead end for the room. Successful completion of the end of the laboratory as well as the game mandates a confrontation with the lab operating system, GLaDOS. By strategic maneuvering, the player incinerates all of GLaDOS' personality cores—morality, curiosity, logic, and anger—in the last puzzle. After the laboratory blows up, the conclusion shows that Chell lays in the parking lot of the Aperture Science Laboratory (ASC), but someone or something that players rightfully assume is GLaDOS mysteriously drags her.

*Portal 2* is an enriched sequel to its previous counterpart, yet the game embodies deeper layers to its narrative. While it is a story of Chell's confrontation with GLaDOS and second escape from Aperture Science Center (ASC), it also functions as a narrative detailing a hierarchy of robots and sadistic scientific practices. By navigating the laboratory's underground main headquarters, the player as Chell receives a history of the Aperture Science Center through the audio-recorded voice of the ASC's former CEO, Cave Johnson. In the form of pre-recorded messages, the former CEO of APC narrates the downfall of the facilities due to bankruptcy and unethical scientific practices. Throughout the game, the player still solves tests in different testing chambers—some that are repeats of the first game—yet, there is more of a backstory, one that describes GLaDOS' mysterious identity. Since the gameplay is separated into different chapters, the player interacts with puzzles conveying different themes. Other characters include Wheatley, a meek robot, who guides Chell until he assumes power over the APS and transfers

GLaDOS into a potato. GLaDOS and Chell put aside their differences and work together to deactivate Wheatley and put GLaDOS back into her “body.” In the end, GLaDOS finally releases Chell as soon as she assumes power over the science laboratory.

### *I.II Research Questions*

In my dissertation, I pose the following questions to ascertain pertinent concepts in my pedagogical model of Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy. In developing my model, I use the *Portal* video game series as a case study to build and explicate ways that students learn in puzzle adventure video games through narrative. As a result, my model develops a type of narrative structure in puzzle adventure games, in which thematic development encompasses and directs the other narrative elements, such as plot, character, setting, use of symbols, and point of view. One type of possible themes could pertain to ways that the *Portal* game series function as ideology critique, in which the games critique the dominant ideologies in class structure and racial, sexual, and gender identities. Games provide either alternative possibilities through a progressive representation of gender, class, race, and sexuality or critique the dominant representation of the aforementioned politics of identity by subtly using sarcasm. Finally, while my pedagogical model ascertains both individual and collective interpretations of the narrative and inherent themes derived. One goal is to develop my pedagogical model based on a critical investigation of this game series, demonstrating that the games are forms of public pedagogy. Thus, I pose the following questions in my dissertation:

- i) What are the themes I see within the games and how does it provide structure for the overall *Portal* narrative?

- ii) What are other interpretations of the Portal game series' narratives? What are some embedded messages that others see in the narrative that could possibly relate to politics of identity: race, gender, class, and sexuality?
- iii) How do the different interpretations of the game narrative enact Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, as an educational model that shows a reciprocal relationship among the player's identity, the game, and the player's unique experiences of the game narrative through gameplay?

### *I.III Use of Portal series in the Classroom and Lesson Plans Based on Portal*

Another important feature of the Portal series is its incorporation into different classroom settings. Within the past couple of years, many articles have indicated the use of the game series in educational settings. Tyler Wilde (2011) writes that Valve Software Corporation is cooperating with schools to help incorporate the game as part of the school curricula, particularly in physics instruction. Ben Kuchera (2011) elaborates on scientific instruction, as Portal's use of spatial relations is integral for lessons in science, technology, and mathematics. In response to the interest in educational use, Valve corporation created a community website for teachers called *Teach with Portals*. According to Ariane Coffin (2012), Valve Corporation wants to continue to provide free online information for teachers to further engender critical thinking skills. In her article, *Valve Wants Schools to Teach with Portals*, Coffin (2012) reveals that the website, Teach with Portals, consists of lesson plans from educators who wanted to share their instructional plans with Valve. While the article mentions that lesson plans range from science to language arts, I feel that much of the educational value on *Portal* is focused primarily on the science and math fields.

Prompted by my interest in the use of the Portal series in a PreK-12 setting, I examined the Teach with Portals website, [www.teachwithportals.com](http://www.teachwithportals.com), and I examined the lesson plans

organized by subject area. Only a handful of teachers from Nashville, TN, Shoreline, WA and Bellevue, WA uploaded lesson plans to the website. The lesson plans range from physics, math, game design and language arts, yet physics and math comprise 16 out of the 18 lesson plans. One of the math lesson plans targets the youngest grade level, 4-5<sup>th</sup> grade, yet the majority of the lessons aim for middle school and high school levels. After skimming all of the lesson plans, I realized that the lesson plans on language arts and game design use the actual games in the lesson, while the physics and math lessons base the concepts on the concepts in the game. While it is impressive that teachers are implementing the scientific concepts from the games, I wonder if the scientific elements of the game overshadow its inherent narrative aspects. The lesson plan on language arts revealed a short 3 line description of a classroom activity in which students take notes on the games to see how the setting influences the characters and plot. After researching its use in college level courses, I realize that educators are implementing more intricate lesson plans based on the setting and characters.

In *College Professor Requires Students to Study Portal*, Indiana Wabash University professor, Tom Goldman, (2010) describes the manner in which a college professor uses Portal in addition to Shakespeare and Aristotle to study different perspectives of humanity. Since the professor admits that the game is “non-textual,” I disagree with him. While the game is not a book, one can analyze the narrative features in a game as one would a literary text. In another article mentioning the same professor, *Intro to GLaDOS 101: A Professor’s Decision to Teach Portal*, Patrick Klepek (2011) includes an interview with Prof. Michael Abbott from Wabash University. In the interview, Abbott expressed the antagonist, GLaDOS, in reference to the hidden aspects of her personality. Using an essay on the presentation of self in theatrical settings, Abbott encouraged students to look for hidden parts of the game to add further details to

the story in *Portal*. He posited that the scientific laboratory functioned as an extension of GLaDOS's personality. After having his students recount their game-playing experiences, Abbott discovered that a third of the students identified with Chell, the protagonist of the story, meaning that they would interchangeably refer to themselves as either Chell or their actual identities. Meanwhile, other students' statements inferred that they themselves escaped the scientific laboratory. Since the college included only male students, Abbott mentioned that a few students admitted surprise at the sight of a female character. Another interesting detail of Abbott's course is that it questioned students' notions of video games. Concerning student resistance to take games seriously as literary art forms, Abbott states, "They have a built-in resistance because they have grown up with their parents and basically American popular culture saying video games equals waste of time," (Klepek, 2011, para. 16).

Although the comment was made in context to higher education, it made me question if the use of the games in the lessons was disregarded due to the misconception of all videogames as "fun" and "non-scholarly." While most literary investigations of the game focus on the setting, my goal is to show the manner by which theme, as an element of fiction, envelop the rest of the narrative elements in the game such as setting, plot, characters, symbols, and point of view, thus guiding the way that players interpret these other elements. There is a gap between the current uses of the game and its potential uses in classrooms, which leads me to suggest that the *Portal* series has literary significance as well as provoking implications for representations of gender, race, and sexuality.

Aside from its high acclaims for its puzzles and witty story-telling, its narrative also depicts several important themes: economic failure of a science lab due to unethical practices, human identity in opposition to cybernetic identity, feminism, life and death impulses. The

games have two main female characters, an antagonist and protagonist, whose image is based on a woman of color. More importantly, the games feature a unique combination of strong gameplay propelled by an intriguing story, a difficult achievement for many videogames. The narrative pushes provocative comments on the social norms of female sexual relationships, the ethics of science experiences, and identity. In other words, it is suggestive that the game developers and game writers pose their perspectives on societal norms through the narrative in the game. Even if it is merely suggestive, players are given freedom to contemplate on the issues presented in the game. For example, a player can consider that ways in which an authoritative figure manipulates her while demonstrating some fascination with her, just as GLaDOS does with Chell/the player. The function of *Portal's* “playable” narrative engages players to experience the story as an embodied character, extending beyond novels with similar content, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

#### *I.IV. Portal as Technoculture*

Upholding a critical theory of technology, Best and Kellner (2001) expose the different implications of technology’s interconnection with human life. In addition to having smaller gadgets such as the smart phones and smaller portable devices, pharming and research incorporates technology, thus blending the human with the mechanical. They discuss the Frankenstein syndrome as “an obsession with control over natural processes, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, divorced from a careful consideration of ethics, politics, and potential consequences,” (p. 162). Taken from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Best and Kellner (2001) use the novel to exemplify the contrast between naturalism and technology and the tendency for scientists to take the role of God to create a new species without any conscious

effort for ethics and their surroundings. Yet, due to a lack of ethical concern, their creations assume lives of their own. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the monster was confused yet kind, only reacting harshly when humans initially mistreated him due to his ugly appearance. Yet, the monster's isolation refers to Frankenstein's lack of concern for his creation and a lack of awareness for the monster's wellbeing, since the monster threatens humanity. The mere presence of the monster affects humanity because this monster shifts the normalcy of the human condition. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the monster was created from already dead subjects, thus the monster evaded death.

Best and Kellner (2001) also discuss the Frankenstein syndrome in reference to the fifth discontinuity. Although they discuss this concept from H.G. Wells' novels and short stories, *Frankenstein* has some relevance to their concept. Adding to Bruce Mazlish's idea of fourth discontinuity, they discuss fifth continuity as the ability for humans to create a superior lifeform that further decenters humanity by proving that humans are no longer the focus of life. This includes a mixture of genetic engineering, as seen in the story in the *Portal* series where Caroline's human life is downloaded into a computer system, GLaDOS. To recapitulate, Mazlish describes 4 discontinuities that suggest humans are fragmented and not the centered focus of life. The first continuity involves the Copernican discovery that Earth is not the center of the universe, and the second discontinuity describes the Darwinian thought that humans evolved from animals, thus not making them a distinct species. Freud's notion of the unconscious desires and factors influencing the subject's decisions unbeknownst to the subject further removes her conscious control over her life. The fourth discontinuity explains for humans to combine technology with human life, such as the use of mechanical prosthetic limbs or laser treatment to enhance eyesight. Best and Kellner propose that the fifth discontinuity

reveals the tendency for humans to create a form of artificial intelligence that is superior to human lives, one that has the potential to destroy human life (Best and Kellner, 2001). This idea helps form a foundation for their discussion on posthumanism.

Best and Kellner (2001) initially discuss this movement towards posthumanism as a theoretical discussion arising from structuralists, poststructuralists, and postmodernist thinkers, who elaborated on the illusions of human control and awareness of their own lives. Rather, they express that the human subject was fragmented and not fully unified as one uniform identity. Further than the fusing between human and machine, as seen in in-vitro insemination or use of cell regeneration in grafting, posthumanism delves deeper into the relationship between humans and technology. The cyborg is an example of a unique fusion of a human and machine, ranging from a human with mechanical parts to a robotic being with a human consciousness (Best and Kellner, 2001). Best and Kellner (2001) show that developments in science and technology allow for people to wear technological gadgets as further extensions of themselves or to model robots into humans. In the case where humans freeze their bodies and further research for human cloning demonstrate the humans are using technology to divert death by extending one's lifespan.

The *Portal* series, therefore, exemplifies a narrative of the interconnection between human and artificial life. In particular, I investigate the way that death is averted and GLaDOS' identity as a cyborg as pertinent themes that the games expose. Extending further than Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the *Portal* narrative positions players to directly witness the creation of life from dead human matter as well as play as a character, who persistently confronts the possibility of death while simultaneously guarding her life. Yet, unlike the novel, *Frankenstein*, the *Portal* series provides a humorous tone to the idea of human identity, making players ask the question

as to whether that part that makes one human fully extinguishes past the decay of flesh. Yet, only discussing the *Portal* narrative as a “playable” technoculture novel limits the whole experience of the game, thus prompting me to look for different experiences of interpreting the narrative. By examining the different interpretations, I am looking at ways that the *Portal* series exposes the way that players think about issues revealed in the game as well as their particular observations based on their subjective life experiences.

#### *I.V. Games as Phenomenological Play*

In his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology”, Martin Heidegger (1954/1977) discusses the essence of technology by initially differentiating between the older form of technology and the modern form of technology. He uses the Greek term, *poiesis*, to denote bringing forth the process “out of concealment forth into unconcealment” (p. 5) or revealing of the essence of the object. He discusses *techne*, the foundation of the word technology, as relating to *episteme*, a way of knowing (Heidegger, 1954/1977). As a result, the connection between the two words suggests that one’s engagement with technology or tools would engender a way of knowing that results in bringing forth either the essence of the activity involved or the essence of the object produced from engagement with a simple tool. Heidegger makes a distinction between the object’s direct interactions with nature, a phenomenon that does not occur with modern technology. He further explains that modern technology reveals but in an unexpected way not in the way of revealing as *poiesis* (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 6). To clarify, he describes the use of the Rhine as providing electricity in a hydroelectric plant as a shift away from the river itself. Rather than just being a river, it is a source of power for the power plant, thus it stores the energy as a reserve. He further discusses that the river symbolizes a source of

power rather than being a river itself (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 7). Yet, the fact that modern technology reveals that it stands for something else shows that it does reveal its interconnecting links in the process even though it does not reveal its essence. Modern technology's essence is a tool for enframing, a term which denotes the use of using an exterior tool such as a skeleton or bookshelf to hold back the item not to directly interact with the object (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 9). Since enframing leads to a revealing of sorts, Heidegger indicates that technology does reveal a relationship that could hinder a human's relationship with nature. Throughout his discussion, he shows a differentiation between the type of revealing as bringing forth and the revealing as a standing reserve or challenging the way that humans approach their destiny (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 15). Yet even though the essence of technology enframes as a way of concealing due to its standing-reserve, it still leads to questioning so it could lead to truth. Despite the toss up between the two types of revealing, "the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes," (Heidegger, 1954/1977, p. 19), it is curious that Heidegger (1954/1977) concludes his essay with another predicament: "the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become," (p. 19).

While Heidegger's distinction does seem to differentiate between the authentic and inauthentic types of revealing—the latter coheres with technophobia—he mentions that devotion to thought involves questioning. Thus, novel ways of thinking can arise from questioning. When one questions and ponders while making an observation, one arises at a newer thought. While modern technology—more specifically a video game—enframes, one ponders whether the phenomenon of enframing is capable of instilling the types of questioning that leads to better understanding of the objects studied or the phenomenon itself. It also raises the question

whether one can develop more critical questions during an observation of an unraveling of a video game narrative because its essence reveals enframing. It causes people to question the tool that enframes as well as the effect of the manner by which the enframing simultaneously occludes and reveals the narrative. Taking a more positive approach to human-technology relations, Don Ihde (1990) posits a phenomenology of technics comprised of 3 different models pertinent to this discussion.

In his book, *Technology and The Lifeworld*, Ihde (1990) articulates the more evident human-technology relationship as encompassing embodiment with technology, influence over one's interpretation with the outside world, and an examination of technology as an idealized other. To keep his explanation brief, I only discuss his models in relation to the use of the *Portal* series as a digital narrative albeit not exclusively just a narrative. The embodiment relation depicts the human use of a form of technology, such as reading glasses, telescope, a walking cane, or a video game controller, to better examine and navigate the exterior world, or the a virtual world in the case of the video game (Ihde, 1990, p. 73). The more transparency that the technology provides, or the easier to manipulate and more immediate connection with the technology, the more the desirable the technology, since it imbues the human a sense of superiority without being constantly reminded of the piece of technology used (Ihde, 1990, p. 74). So in the instance of the video game, there might be different types of game consoles with their respective control devices, which include the personal computer. While playing the game, the player controls Chell's movements with the controller, thus eradicating the idea that they are using a form of technology as a mediator to engage with the game. In a later work, Ihde (2010) terms that embodiment technics allow for players to develop technofantasies, or the ancient wishes and desires for the power allowed in the embodiment process that gives the player

sensation of that experience. Citing the desire for flying as an example, Idhe explains that people appeal to the embodiment process through technology to fulfill a desire (Idhe, 2010). For the Portal series, the technofantasy could be to excavate an old building and defy laws of gravity through the portal device.

Idhe (1990) also provides the hermeneutic relationship model as a way to describe one's engagement with technology to interpret the outside world. This model is much more complex because it entails more than just physical embodiment, thus even a form of technology such as writing and even the alphabet can be considered as affecting not only a person's interpretation but also how its surrounding culture affected its development. In the example of the alphabet, Idhe (1990) uses the Chinese hieroglyphic depiction of a horse after the invention of paper and brush and India ink that impacted the way that one depicted the word "horse" (p. 83-84). To simplify, a good example of a hermeneutic relationship is that of a thermometer that tells of snowy weather outside even though the person might be inside his or her home not directly feeling the sensation of being cold (Idhe, 1990, p. 85). Some technological tools change the way that one perceives information about the outside world that they would not see while using this particular tool. For instance, the use of heat-sensitive night scopes enable military or police to see people through their body heat as opposed to the perception of those people without such tools (Idhe, 1990, p. 86). Thus, this example shows a combination of embodiment and hermeneutic models, which is similar to the effect one achieves when using the computer or the game console to affect their interpretation of a game narrative.

As opposed to reading a book or passively engaging with a film—if one only considers one's physical stance as opposed to one's intellectual engagement which may fluctuate depending on the film watcher—the player embodies Chell while playing the *Portal* games, yet

she interprets the game differently depending on his or her life narratives. While Heidegger might state that the games enframe the narratives, Idhe offers a positive way to show that the computer or gaming console allows for the player to physically and mentally engage with the puzzles. While the players' interpretations of the overall game vary, there are evident features, specifically GLaDOS' character which players unanimously find humorous and simultaneously cruel, empowering, admirable, and transformative. Thus, their readings of the narrative suggest that while they may solve puzzles differently than each other thus rendering the linear narrative with subtle differences, they all indicate that GLaDOS' storyline conveys the important themes of the story, ranging from female empowerment to mechanical transformation into human traits.

Ironically, the hermeneutic relationship shown in the aforementioned example refers to the third pertinent model in Idhe's phenomenology of technics, the world or object examined as other, while also alluding to GLaDOS as an example of synecdoche, in which the character itself represents a computerized other that refers to the computer with which one uses to play the game. Idhe's alterity model describes human fascination with technology including yet not exclusive to artificial intelligence based on both the perceived similarities and differences between human and artificial intelligence (Idhe, 1990, p. 99-100). He considers the differences between human senses and that of a robot's. Using the lecture hall as a means of comparison, he explains that the human student would selectively listen to the professor or any sound that captures her interest—granted that she does not want to listen to the professor—and visually focus on selective people or his or her notes. Yet, the robot's field of sound and vision would encapsulate any possible sound and a panoramic view of the interior of the lecture hall (Idhe, 1990, p. 103). Idhe's point refers to the differences between human and artificial perception, which highlights the manner by which humans engage with the computerized other. Computers

and game consoles exemplify the other, especially in the case of this dissertation. However, the *Portal* games suggest an additional layer, perhaps commenting on a player's fascination with a computerized other.

GLaDOS symbolizes a computerized being, who transgresses in and out of human experience. As previously articulated, her interactions with Chell range from antagonistic to caring, making the player feel frustrated, humorous relief, and awe throughout solving the puzzles. When taking the perspective that the games offer players an experience which includes engagement and embodiment with a character to render a narrative, the use of GLaDOS as a symbol for the other enhances one's understanding of the other as that which feigns human resemblance thus showing her otherness. The story itself becomes a human fantasy of combining forces, thus making the player feel what Idhe describes as a technofantasy of embodying a human and navigating space, yet also having a superior being,

Thus, as a form of technoculture, the *Portal* series becomes a narrative that a player not only embodies and witnesses GLaDOS' monstrosity—in the context of both her caustic comments and her attributes to Donna Haraway's definition of a cyborg, a notion I explain in further detail in Chapter V—but also impacts the player's relationships to the gameplay experience, learning through narrative, and game itself.

#### *I.V. Games in Educational Context*

James Paul Gee's early work on video games and literacy demonstrates a deterministic perspective of games as either forms of technology that control the mindsets of the younger students or as highly effective tools to engage them mentally. In his article, *Pleasure and 'Being a Professional,'* Gee (2007) discusses the educational value of video games as providing

effective learning experiences. Giving the video games, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, *Thief*, and *Riddick*, as examples, Gee posits that game players vicariously learn by controlling the character's actions and sharing a game character's experiences. He dismisses formal education because the students lack "motivation to study and become competent," (p. 81), but video games allow for "simulations in their heads through which they can think about and imaginatively test out future actions and hypothesis," (Gee, 2007, p. 81).

Gee refers to video games as a form of public pedagogy, a virtual affinity space inviting many individuals to learn by doing (Gee, 2007, 2009). Kurt Squire (2002) concurs with Gee's assessment of the progressive pedagogical essence in video games. He frames his discussion of "learning by doing" by using Activity Theory, a sociocultural approach that emphasizes the community, context, and actors inflicting change through use of a cultural artifact. Squire explains that video games are cultural artifacts, which transform players' learning by providing different contexts. Even if the contexts are simulations, players transfer their virtual contexts for real world contexts (Squire, 2002).

In his more influential article, *Video Game Literacy: A Literacy of Expertise*, Kurt Squire (2008) presents a pertinent discussion of games as liminal spaces, interactive text, ideological spaces, and cultural artifacts. Kurt Squire posits that, as cultural artifacts, games provide spaces to effectively problem solve and engage in an interactive narrative.

Taking on Henry Jenkins' discussion of virtual space as a form of storytelling, Squire explains that video games provide an interactive narrative. Games are also remediated forms of older forms of games, such as board games. Through the repetition of cycles of action in games, people can render the story and solve problems. Squire (2008) explains the manner by which researchers argue that games present dynamic systems that allow players to transform by

overcoming the challenges in the game. Games allow for players to become reflective on their performance and actions, a position that entails ethical reflection especially if the game presents a situation in which a player cannot proceed unless rendering an unethical choice (Squire, 2008).

An apt example is Lars Konzack's (2009) analysis of the philosophical component to video gameplay, especially in games with open-ended aspects to ethical decision-making. For example, in his article, *Philosophical Game Design*, he discusses the game, *Jennifer Government NationStates*, as positioning the player to make political decisions affecting "political freedom, civil rights, and the economy," (Konzack, 2009, p. 42). According to Konzack, the game consists of playing as a nation state and of answering questions to determine the state category. With regards to the ethical decision-making process, the game presents opportunities for students to experiment with notions of state categories and its political ramifications depending on the choice. Another game, *McDonalds Video Game*, demonstrates the ramifications of unethical choices within a capitalist corporation. Such unethical choices range from providing unhealthy conditions for cows to making cost-effective decisions at a particular McDonald's location (Konzack, 2009). Aside from presenting players ethical matters, video games also present ideologies embedded in certain skill developments in game challenges.

Squire defines ideological spaces as "worlds constructed by particular viewpoints that tend to lead toward the expression of particular ideas," (Squire, 2008, p. 652), and such expression of ideas factors into development of specific skills for a particular game. Citing Talmadge Wright's study on *Half Life* and Zhan Li's master's thesis on the video game, *America's Army*, Kurt Squire (2008) posits that liminal space provides players different social contexts and different ethos for the purpose of play. Thus, game ideologies are communicated in liminal spaces, and players interact with abstract philosophical themes through play. In his

examination of video games in educational literature, games scholar, Ian Bogost (2007) initially ponders the large gap between the cognitive psychological model and the sociocultural perspectives. Aligning his investigation of games to Squire and Gee's work, Bogost combines the notions of studying games as specific cultural artifacts and examining the sociocultural "real life" contexts of a gaming activity (Bogost, 2007). Moreover, he articulates a middle position.

Bogost's answer on video games as educational perfectly describes a balance in looking particularly at games as cultural artifacts in themselves and the cultural context within the game and as its expressive content about the larger context in the real world. The latter includes ideologies, perspectives, and problem-solving skills that transfer to the player's reality (Bogost, 2007). He states,

videogame players develop procedural literacy through interacting with the abstract models of specific real or imagined processes presented in the games they play.

Videogames teach biased perspectives about how things work. And the way they teach such perspectives is through procedural rhetoric, (p. 260).

Using Gee's notion of embodied learning or situated learning, Bogost (2007) further explains that games present a simulated version of particular contexts. The player's interactions with the simulations allow her to build skills to transfer to real-world similar situations or situations that present similar conflicts or issues. Bogost (2007) defines procedural literacy as a way to use simulated experiences and their particular contexts to allow one to better interpret one's skills for their real-world counterpart in addition to its embedded commentary on the cultural practices within the game. He aptly proves his point with Play Mobil toys. Although these toys are constructed with a specific context, the pieces can allow for substitution and

creative input from the person playing with the toy. Each player can use each piece as a metaphor for other pieces, moving past its literal context (Bogost, 2007).

One example of procedural literacy involves Ben DeVane and Kurt Squire's (2008) study on players' construction of racial identities in the game *Grand Theft Auto*. While DeVane and Squire do not mention the term, procedural literacy, their results from gamers' responses to the racist portrayal in the game illustrate Bogost's notion. After interviewing players from three different cultural contexts, DeVane and Squire (2008) examine three different perceptions of the representation of race in *Grand Theft Auto*. While some considered the racial portrayal of African-Americans as stereotypical, others commented on the material effects, such as poverty, poor housing conditions of the housing projects and the abuse from police, of structural and institutional racism. Thus, their study indicates that representation of race informs players' notions of racial identity and that games teach players about notions of race through racial representation (DeVane and Squire, 2008). A game, therefore, promotes certain ideologies through its politics of representation. Such an examination of games as cultural artifacts and its meaning within a real world perspective alludes to critical media literacy and a cultural studies approach to video games.

My position is a critical position on video games that involves an investigation into the themes of the game as depicted through gameplay and narrative and its politics of representation. Using Bogost's discussion of procedural literacy as influence, I use this notion as a way to describe the development of different themes in a game narrative and the broader contexts that a player may discuss based on her real-life experiences. His view supports the current trend in sociocultural literature, showing the learning contexts in games, yet, it also supports my consideration of a cultural studies approach to games. Moreover, Bogost's notion of procedural

literacy supports the idea of embedded content in games or the ideological content that infiltrates into players' consciousness.

So far, I describe some initial uses of the *Portal* video game series in terms of its narrative and uses in the K-University classroom settings as well as some concerns of games in terms of functioning as technoculture, phenomenological play, and educational tools. This brief explanation helps to solidify the need to create the model, Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, and the theoretical notions that comprise it. I spend the next chapter further explaining the theoretical components of the model, while also upholding the narratology perspective in video games. In my third chapter, I discuss the methods that follow a cultural studies tradition, specifically addressing both my textual analysis and audience reception, in which I use a phenomenological approach in qualitative research to collect data from other players. In my fourth and fifth chapters, I conduct a deep textual analysis of the *Portal* games that demonstrate an analysis of politics of representation while using components of French philosophy to do so, thus showing that the narrative conveys depth comparable to the written and cinematic formats. In particular, I offer a reconstruction of Sigmund Freud's, Jacques Lacan's, and Gilles Deleuze's ideas in my analysis of the themes in the *Portal* series. In my sixth chapter, I reveal different players' interpretations of the games; some interpretations cohere with mine, thus addressing the games' educational power through narrative. Yet, their responses also indicate their unique perspectives that reflect slices of their own lives, since their own subjectivities inform the ways by which they read and navigate through the digital medium. In addition to raising critical awareness of the narrative content through the exploration of themes, I want to make aware that these games make commentary on death and life, homoeroticism, mother-daughter relationships, gender and class transgression, misuse of power, and unethical scientific practices. I consider,

therefore, that the extensive explication of such themes necessary to understand the manner that games pervasively instruct on social issues beyond the means of game mechanics.

## *Chapter II*

### *Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy*

In this chapter, I provide a layout of concepts that inform my pedagogical model, Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, as it derives from a narratologist approach in games. Considering the concern of games in education, I explain how my model borrows from educational philosophy and arises from a discussion from narrative structure in oral, written and digital traditions. Borrowing key ideas from cultural studies, Freirean Pedagogy, and philosophical tenets from Fredrich Schiller and Herbert Marcuse's aesthetic educational philosophy, I develop Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy as a theoretical pedagogical model to describe the manner by which players learn in video games by engaging in the narratives. Their interpretation of the narrative is highly dependent on their gameplay experiences, thus accounting for each player's subjective life experiences and perspectives of various artifacts and plot lines in the games. A component of this pedagogical model, however, also refers to the perspective of video games as emergent narrative forms, so I also describe seminal texts that attribute narrative features in video games. Since video game narratologists, a term referring to those scholars who do perceive video games as emergent narratives, do allude to older narrative models, my discussion includes brief descriptions of older narrative models. It is important, however, to state the concern of the direct effect games have on learning and their potential for raising critical awareness on themes that I will later articulate in my later chapters. By providing commentary

on different issues, such as death, life, and power, such deep investigation of the *Portal* themes shows the pervasive nature of embedded messages.

Games do have a pedagogical function. Some scholars have pontificated on the story-telling methods, meanings derived from games, and emotional content that stimulate players' cognition. In his later work, such as his article, *Stories, Probes, and Games*, James Paul Gee (2011) describes story-telling as a cultural and social aspect of any civilization and a tool that encompasses reflective action that determines anticipated outcomes. Furthermore, one's story or narrative portrays the narrator's identity as perceived through the retelling of experiences, decisions, and observations. Gee (2011) further mentions that players embody virtual characters to make certain decisions in order to bring about anticipated outcomes. Thus, Gee's conjecture is that there are two narratives taking place. Firstly, there is the video game narrative that the player decides to play. Secondly, there is the experience of gameplay—the interweaving of a player's reality as the game proceeds (Gee, 2011). Michele Dickey's work on game narratives supports both of Gee's analyses of narrative in video games. Her first study focuses on her discussion of narrative design in games and its applicability in learning environments.

In *Game Design Narrative for Learning: Appropriating Adventure Game Design Narrative Devices and Techniques for the Design of Interactive Learning Environments*, Dickey (2006) further analyzes two narrative structures within adventure games: motivation and cognition. For motivation, there are two “literary techniques” that inspire motivation within players. First, the game presents a plot hook or conflict that keeps the player in suspense of the plot, thus creating the desire to solve the conflict. The other literary technique is emotional proximity, or the game's ability to inspire players on an emotional level in order to have players identify with the characters' conflicts.

On the other hand, the narrative structure helps cognition in that it offers players the abilities to interconnect setting, plot, and characters and make sense of the various quests. Furthermore, players make assertions and conjectures about the consequences of their actions if they make a character act a particular way. In her later study, Dickey (2011) examines students playing a game and notes their abilities to construct narratives depending on their gameplay. In order to learn and effectively create narratives or meaning in the game, she posits that games must have high levels of interactivity, motivation, and curiosity (Dickey, 2011). Thus, both Dickey and Gee elaborate on the manner by which story-telling factors in the students' learning process, or rather that students learn through digital stories due to their emotional content that motivates students to engage with the game.

While I do not negate the value of using games to teach academic concepts, my position is that games themselves have ideological content that impresses itself upon the players, whether or not the players consciously acknowledge it. My position is that games themselves require deeper study as cultural objects that have content that attaches itself to players' minds impacting their subjectivities. It may seem as if all games scholars are commenting on the same issue, that the content in games allows for players to comment on their own lives through the story. Yet, I am suggesting another perspective to this broad issue. Regardless of their practical applicability in schools, narrative structure in puzzle adventure games comments on the larger discussion of digital narratives by two methods. One must initially construe the structure of the narrative by articulating the themes and the ways they encapsulate the content in other narrative elements in the game. Secondly, one must also regard not only the thematic content but also the ideological content, or the ways that representation subtly informs players of other social issues outside of

the game. Both methods borrow discussions from educational philosophy and narrative structure.

### *II.I Play as Concrete Enactment of Abstract Ideals in Freire, Schiller, and Marcuse*

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2006) conceptualizes two educational models, the banking and problem-posing models. The banking model consists of pedagogical practices that position educators as the holders of knowledge and the students as empty receptacles attentive to the deposit of knowledge. Students remain passive audiences to the educator who assembles and interprets the course material for the students. On the contrary, the problem-posing model dissolves the inequality of power relations between traditional pedagogy. Its methodology engenders the student's construction of knowledge based on her lived experiences (Freire, 2006). Thus, in the problem-posing model, students use education as a means of defining their lived experiences and critically transforming their consciousness by examining their perceived limitations and constructing a solution for such limitations. These solutions involve a critical investigation of course material, thus substantiating the abstract notions in the course material (Freire, 2006). Freire (2006) aptly defines this model as "bases[ing] itself on creativity and stimulates[ing] true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation," (p. 84).

The problem-posing model entails true dialogue between educators and students, which involves communication that emphasizes equally on reflection and action. It entails an existential transformation that embodies an intersubjective process of listening, speaking, and reflecting. Since dialogue is a social encounter, it involves work to name the world and rename

it to better suit the interlocutors (Freire, 2006). Although this sounds abstract, it refers to the act of naming a problem or perceived limitation, co-constructing knowledge to determine a solution for that particular problem. The social nature of dialogue necessitates faith, hope, love, courage, and critical thinking from all members. The goal for dialogue is to embody the process of becoming and reality as a process rather than a fixed entity. Dialogue encompasses the process of overcoming perceived limitations, or “limit-act,” a term denoting limitation yet also an act to overcome its concomitant oppression (Freire, 2006). Freire (2006) also describes limit-acts as part of each individual’s generative themes, a series of historical and cultural meanings of one’s concrete action with one’s environment. These themes generate a better understanding of one’s existential presence in the world; actions are contextualized within a given time and place, but individuals also reflect on their actions and its historical significance. Themes are both abstract and concrete in nature. Their symbolic meanings, within social interactions, make them abstract, yet human actions are manifestations of the abstract nature, making them concrete. In addition, an investigation of generative themes involves limit-situations, or periods when one cannot transcend the oppressive nature of the situation (Freire, 2006). In other words, one cannot critically reflect on actions either due to societal factors, or structural impediments on a person, causing that person to maintain the status quo. Education requires thematic investigations for subjects to become fully conscious and socially aware (Freire, 2006). Therefore, effective change in education, or any social movement, requires “a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character,” (Freire 2006, p. 107).

A generative theme may be, therefore, the symbolic value of video games in students’ subjectivities. Thematic investigation involves a dialogical critical view of one’s existential transformation through the examination of important ideas, objects, and meanings. Since

Freire's notion of thematic investigation involves critical analysis and reflection of limit-acts, abstract ideas or physical manifestations of these ideas in everyday life, one must analyze common objects for its subjective relevance from individuals. Thus, forms of mass media function as artifacts of generative themes, such as video games that embody critical analysis of its representations and ideology within the gameplay. To better illustrate the manner by which games allow students to derive meaning from their content, Henry Jenkins discusses the role that the representation of violence in games has on the player.

In his essay, *The War between Effects and Meanings*, Henry Jenkins (2006) refers to the notion of games as ideological spaces in his discussion of the division between two paradigms of video games: meaning of games and the effects of games. The effects perspective argues that exposure to violence in games causes young people to enact the same amount of violence in their daily lives. Yet, Jenkins upholds the "meanings" perspective, which considers the various ways players create meaning from the game's visuals, storyline, representations of characters, and overall theme of the game. While Jenkins admits that violence in games exists, he considers that games provide opportunities for students to become reflective about the representation of violence in the game and imagined violence if the situation occurred in real life. Using *Sims* as an example, Jenkins (2006) admits, "we are encouraged to examine our own values by seeing what we are willing to do within virtual space," (p. 217), thus attributing a reflective quality in video games.

Situating the games within thematic investigations, I perceive that their symbolic significance refers to the numerous layers of concentric circles affecting the individual, one of them could be violence or moral decision making that is applicable to decisions in their lives. Freire (2006) described thematic investigations as numerous layers of concentric circles that

necessitate unraveling in order to detect the different limit-acts. Games function as artifacts and as indicators of the player's thoughts and feelings. Thus, a thematic investigation using games ascertains an individual's perceptions and values, even though the games are simulations. In certain situations when the individual experiences a negative emotion in regards to her real life circumstances, games offer a safety zone to articulate the difficulties and perceived limitations. With regards to problem-posing education, Freire (2006) articulates a powerful and touching statement about subjectivity in relation to learning: "Problem-posing education affirms men and women as being in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality," (p. 84). Thus, it proves that artifacts of cultural and symbolic significance should require more in-depth study. If thematic investigation is part of the problem-posing educational model, then the process of becoming entails a study of those artifacts whose material presence alludes to one's subjectivity. Freire's interconnection of problem-posing education and thematic investigation to student subjectivity pertains to Friedrich Schiller's description of the play impulse in his treatise in aesthetic education.

In his *Letter on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller (1795/2004) suggests a model of aesthetic education reveals an eradication of the opposition of formal impulses, as articulated in reason or conceptual analysis, and sense impulses, as experienced in the temporal nature of one's material and physical existence. Suggesting the play impulse as part of the solution to unify the different internal fragments of an individual, Schiller defined it as an aesthetic state as a process of simultaneously developing sense perception and reasoning, instead of restricting oneself to the sense impulse or the formal impulse. This notion of play impulse concerns an inner drive that combines sensory faculties, which simply receives sensory stimuli, and one's reasoning abilities or social laws (Schiller 1795/2004). Therefore, the function of the

play impulse is to allow the sense and formal impulse to coexist and thus to eradicate the limitations one impulse has over the other. By combining elements of sense and formal impulses, the play impulse has attributes of both impulses and enables beings to acquire freedom as defined as a moral and physical expansion of the mind morally and physically (Schiller, 1795/2004).

One can engage with the beauty by perceiving its conceptual ideal into the form of a material object. Schiller's notion of the Beautiful primarily exists as an idea, but one finds it by playing with material objects to construct a new idea, theme, or a form of art (Schiller, 1795/2004). Due to the fact that Beauty "must be exhibited as a necessary condition of humanity" (Schiller, 1795/2004, p. 60), it forms a requisite for an aesthetic experience. Drawing from Immanuel Kant's notion of common sense as the "subjective principle which determines only by feeling rather than by concepts," (Kant, 1790/1987, p. 20), Schiller attributes this function to the play impulse as a cognitive *free play* of the imagination and understanding that allows for a simultaneous conjunction of intuition and understanding of the communicative powers that a beautiful object elicits. While I do not suggest that all video games themselves are beautiful objects, I do perceive they provide opportunities for experiencing the cognitive free play if the beautiful object itself is the player's interpretation of a narrative in a game.

While many recent games have beautiful graphics that enhance the immersive process, I argue instead that games present players with alternative ways to construct new ideas or themes by engaging with a mediating object—a liminal, concrete yet immaterial three dimensional world. By engaging in the story, players expand their minds by allowing their cognitive faculties to question certain plot twists that differ greatly from their everyday experiences. Nonetheless, many graphics in games borrow from settings in present realities, such as the case

in *Portal* where the setting appears as an abandoned science lab, old factories, and retro offices. A player, therefore, might not feel too different from engaging in a similar setting in real life. Decision making in games allow for moral expansion that allows players to look at similar decisions in their real lives in an informed manner. While players engage with the game, they perceive the material qualities in the game albeit in the form of a simulacrum, yet their form refers to their real counterparts in reality, thus giving games that mediating role.

Games also present opportunities for players to perceive results from similar decisions made in reality. Just as games allow for the play impulse to arise in developing new themes and ideas from the player's minds, players also become more knowledgeable about their own subjective experience by interacting with the games. In the context of games, the play impulse is inherent in Freire's notion of thematic investigation, as it allows for the process of becoming as unfinished beings or beings in the process of an act prior to physically enacting it. Both educational philosophies focus on development of themes as new thoughts or existing thoughts or abstract concepts manifest in physical situations, thus showing the manner by which themes arise from both an abstract ideal finds its form in one's engagement with one's reality. Games, especially video games, are symbolic of similar situations in lived realities yet also have an abstract nature inherent to them. I argue that themes are central to Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, since they form the foundation of narratives in video games. The role of games provides the player freedom previously limited from the formal impulse and sensory impulse, similar to the role that Schiller gives aesthetic objects. In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse (1998) examines Schiller's explanation of the function of art as entailing opportunities for freedom from the seriousness of reason through using sensuousness to make art. By engaging with aesthetic objects, one examines the formal qualities of art and using the

imagination to make sense of the object represented. By using the imagination, viewers have freedom in their reasoning skills and cognitive skills. Extending the conversation to the use of video games, players use their imagination to problem-solve, thus effectively allowing them to reason in a freeing way (Marcuse, 1998). By associating play with freedom of the restraints imposed by reason, both Schiller and Marcuse illustrate ways by which one could understand that games allow players to learn while using their imaginations. Players engage in narratives when playing the games, especially puzzle adventure games that involve logical puzzle solving to render the story. Thus, the players are actively immersed in free play when interacting with the games. Referring specifically to Freire's generative themes, one scholar reflects on the use of Monopoly to critically question the theme of meritocracy. In his example, he used the board game to create a new idea to question the moral validity of judging monetary success in life on one's merit without taking into account oppressive social prejudices that inform the manner meritocracy is judged.

Francesco Crocco's article, *Critical Gaming Pedagogy*, employs critical pedagogy and ideology critique through the process of playing Monopoly. Crocco (n.d.) describes Freire's technique of "codification," which involves a dialogical unraveling of meaning and analysis of a particular medium. Part of Crocco's critical gaming pedagogy involves the use of a game to develop new epistemes and ways to transform the social realities. He developed a case study of students playing a version of Monopoly that consists of playing as predetermined characters according to class and material possessions. Crocco assigned groups of students to play as a character type, such as a wealthy white male, a middle-class white male, a working class Black female, and a Latina immigrant and simulates class privilege by assigning rules to the roll of the die depending on the character. For example, the wealthy white male character was assigned

more flexibility to move around the board according to the roll of the die. The Latina immigrant character, however, was assigned limited movement unless the roll of the die was a high number. Afterwards, Crocco (n.d.) had the students critically reflect on their anticipated expectations on the different characters' results. After students observed the relationship between class inequalities and character results, they were asked to determine ways to make opportunities equal (Crocco, n.d.). The gameplay revealed the manner by which students rationalized the characters' different levels of success. Some attributed the significance of education to the wealthier characters, thus demonstrating the myth of meritocracy. Others commented on the risk of having the less fortunate characters move around the board, since it was likely that they would land on the property of the wealthier characters and would have to pay a fine.

The main reason for Crocco's case study is to demonstrate the false notions of meritocracy as the only indicator of financial success and equalizer in education. More clearly, talent, intellect, and educational level do not determine a person's financial success; rather, a person's social class and race better position her to attain better professional and financial success. Moreover, the students used the game—an artifact denoting common and popular leisurely pastime—to critically argue for better ways to ensure social justice and to critically develop a narrative that affects the way they perceive real life meritocracy. Therefore, the Monopoly gameplay demonstrates a manner by which students actively participate in knowledge construction through thematic investigation and through creatively rearticulating ways by which players can create new ideas to ensure equality. Although the artifact presents a simulated reality, the results of the gameplay conveys symbolic significance to real-life situations.

While Freire, Schiller, and Marcuse's' educational philosophies articulate a theoretical way of understanding the use of cultural artifacts as mediators impacting learning, Critical Media

Studies scholars use specific artifacts to examine underlying themes intended to informally educate viewers. Since Critical Media Studies refers to a subcategory of Cultural Studies, a school of thought that started investigating ways by which media artifacts such as the television, radio, magazines, and advertisements in such media communicated ideals of living. Such ideals reflected pressure to consume, yet viewers and listeners, those who seemed to passively receive the information, learned to consume in order to reflect middle class standards. Cultural studies originated from studying the ways that such artifacts communicated issues of class, but more scholars noticed that the depiction of a straight, white, cisgendered male as an ideal indicated unequal perception in people of different race, gender, and sexuality. For the purpose of my study, I use Douglas Kellner's articulation of critical media studies and cultural studies to inform Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy. Kellner's approach to cultural studies and critical media studies originates from a multiperspectival theoretical approach and attributes power to the viewers so that they no longer remain passive receptors of the themes in media cultural artifacts.

## *II. II. Critical Media Literacy and Cultural Studies*

Borrowing from John Dewey's notion of experiential learning and reflection, critical media literacy scholars assert the significance of engaging students with media, since it is both culturally relevant and a part of students' daily lives. To better clarify, Kellner and Share (2007) assert that critical media literacy "brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of much media education in order to guide teachers and students in their exploration of how power, media, and information are linked," (p. 10). By expanding on the notions of media arts and literacy education, critical media literacy entails a deep investigation of media as cultural artifacts that determine student

ideologies. While some examples include films, comic books, TV shows, and music, it can also include newer modes of communication such as social networking. Conducting critical media literacy entails textual analysis, which is the process of interpreting and reinterpreting media as a text (Kellner and Share, 2007), but it also involves studying ways that the text determines student behavior and views on communication.

Since Douglas Kellner's multiperspectival approach to cultural studies describes a broad theoretical framework comprising different concepts from Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, British cultural studies, Frankfurt School, feminism, and multiculturalism, I describe the specific concepts. Kellner's approach examines the political economy and production of a media artifact, the audience reception, and the artifact itself as text. The latter part consists of an investigation of dominant ideologies, as seen in the representations of politics of identity: race, sex, gender, sexuality, ability, and class. Since media production consists of power relations between the producers and the audience, the deconstruction of media artifacts allows for the audience to regain power (Kellner, 1995, 2009). In *Media Culture*, Kellner suggests that the media reflects social experiences, thoughts, feelings, discourses, and practices. For example, he analyzes the Rambo films as a discursive visual representation of the conservative political militarist policies in the 1980s, and Rambo himself symbolizes masculinity, virility, and independence—a redemptive force for American remorse about the outcome of the Vietnam War. As a result, through such analysis of the films as opposed to passively watching them, a viewer understands that the films function as ideological wishes to end communism (Kellner, 1995).

The multiperspectival approach in cultural studies necessitates a brief discussion of some seminal texts that directly influence its methodology. In Stuart Hall's influential essay, *Encoding and Decoding*, Hall (2006) describes the process of encoding a particular media text

with dominant ideological messages. The production of any media text involves a material process and embedded social relations. The reception of the text is only part of the relationship, as Hall indicates that consumption of meaning substantiates the production of the media text (Hall, 2006). While Hall gives equal value to the production and reception of a media text, I feel that his emphasis on decoding a media text—specifically the audio-visual television medium as a text—and its literal and connotative meanings gives more value to the content analysis of media. Hall (2006) further elaborates that the way to disable the power relations as indicated in the economic and social relations in the production process is to conduct content analysis, a term also referred to as textual analysis. Although the literal meaning of a media text communicates the power relations, the connotative meanings further transform the reception of a text. Connotative meanings mask the ideological messages, thus making viewers readily accept the text without deeper investigation. Yet, the literal meanings also contribute to the effectiveness of the connotative signification (Hall, 2006). By decoding a media text, viewers dismantle the dominant ideological views in order to stop an unhealthy transformation in meaning. In a situation in which a person views a dominant view of people of color through the representation of people in a media text, it can negatively transform the viewer's perspective of people of color. Unless the viewer critically questions the representation, her view will align with the dominant hegemonic view. Yet, the decoding of the literal and connotative meanings also promises a positive view of transformation, since the viewer adopts an oppositional interpretation of the media text. Oppositional codes infer a critical interpretation of a text, which gives agency to the viewer, since she reads beyond the intended meaning of the textual information. Hall also discusses negotiated codes, a form of media reception in which the viewer upholds both the

dominant views in an abstract universal situation yet also the oppositional in more particular situations (Hall, 2006).

In particular to ideology critique in textual analysis, Kellner's multiperspectival approach borrows from Louis Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatus, a public or private institution in which ideals are enforced through social practices. Although Althusser expounds upon the Church as an example of ideological state apparatus, his explanation of the school as exemplary of indoctrination of capitalist practices is more significant to my discussion. In combination with the media as a cultural ideological state apparatus, the school is the most influential site for learning the ideologies required to prepare them for future employment—a pattern substantiating class division (Althusser, 1994). Althusser's definitions of ideology are crucial to understanding the need for ideology critique in the cultural studies tradition. Similar to psychoanalytic theory, Althusser posits that subjects are already made, since individuals are immersed into ideological structures. In other words, ideologies interpolate subjects in the sense that the very idea of being a subject already entails the pervasive nature of ideology (Althusser, 1994). The fact that subjects recognize other subjects and use social practices to determine their judgment enforces the embedded nature of ideology. In a succinct manner, Althusser (1994) posits his critique of how ideology becomes naturalized. He states that every individual has a consciousness, which allows her to think that her ideas stem from this consciousness and gives her the ability to enact her own free will (Althusser, 1994, p. 127). His point underscores the relevance of developing pedagogy within a public institution that allows for critical investigation of ideological state apparatuses. While it may be that humans are socially constructed or “already made,” one can alter the way ideologies constrict notions of being subjects.

Moreover, Kellner's notion of textual analysis mirrors Roland Barthes' discussion of mythology in the cultural industry, as a model for the examination of how ideological critique functions as a decoding of a language. His discussion of myth as depoliticized speech is actually a description of how capitalist or bourgeois ideology is naturalized into society. For Barthes, speech arises in different forms, such as discourse, movies, ads, photography, and many forms of media. His notion of language involves a brief discussion of the signifier, signified, and sign. In any given language, the signifier is the spoken part in speech; the signified is the visual image or concept. The sign is the combination of signifier and signified (Barthes, 1972). Myth, however, is a second-order semiological system, so it is a system about language or discourse. Barthes (1972) distinguishes myth as meta-language, as speaking about a particular language or "linguistic system," and refers to a language as "language-object." In this second-order system, the signifier, signified, and sign in the first-order, the language-object, becomes the signifier for the second-order system, or the myth. Due to the loaded quality of this second-order signifier, Barthes (1972) describes the signifier as having two functions, as form and meaning. As meaning, the signifier retains its history, but it gets turned into an empty form when myth takes over. Barthes states, "The meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions," (p. 117).

But, in myth, the signifier could become simply form, or the empty indicator that leads to another intended concept. Since the new signified is the concept, and the concept could have numerous signifiers, the signification process involves the second-order process of the combination of the signifier and signified. Yet, this process is more complicated in that the signifier has duplicity and duality. Since myths involve any form of media or combination of words and images, people can choose to manipulate messages. The signification is the myth-

making process. The combination of meaning and concept can be distorted due to the duality of the signifier. This is important to grasp because the duality of the signifier expands and minimizes its associative concept. Barthes further explains that one never takes both views at once. The signifier is either meaning or form, so it diverts into two different main directions. He gives the example of a traveler's observations of a landscape. The traveler either sees the windowpane or perceives the landscape; one view obstructs the other. The concept, however, does not get rid of the duality but stores it<sup>3</sup>. In relation to decoding the second order signification in media artifacts, Barthes' notion of myth-making in regards to ads suggesting colonialist propaganda functions as a comparison for unpacking the codes in textual analysis.

Politics of representation, an integral focus in Kellner's multiperspectival approach, exemplifies the ways that deconstructing embedded messages about gender, race, and class.

Framing her view on feminist theories, bell hooks states,

Feminist theorists acknowledged the overwhelming significance of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class long before men decided to talk more about these issues altogether. Yet mainstream culture, particularly mass media, was not willing to tune into a radical political discourse that was not privileging one issue over the other, (hooks, 2000, p. 8).

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<sup>3</sup> Barthes also gives the example of a French propaganda ad. The French propaganda ad reveals a young black male saluting the French flag. The signification either reveals that the French did colonize other people and these colonized people revere the French nation or that the black male is a symbol for French imperialism. The more compressed interpretation, which is one where signification is most prevalent, is where the black male exemplifies and condones French imperialism. This third position entails a process where the language is naturalized. In other words, the third interpretation makes imperialism natural and normal. Barthes indicates that this interpretation eradicates history and other interpretations. The black male is French imperialism, not a colonized subject with a past or a symbol of the subjects targeted by French imperialism. The act of naturalizing the communication is the result of concepts being sublimated through negation and betrayal in language.

In her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks reveals the interconnections of race, class, and gender in media representations. Part of feminist discourse in relation to media studies investigates the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in addition to critiquing some cultural studies traditions that only examine one element of politics of representation (Crenshaw, 1993). Describing a critical interrogation of the representation of gender, race, class, and sexuality as cultural criticism, bell hooks (1990) asserts that it arises from liberatory pedagogy or critical pedagogy. Since cultural criticism also intersects with a postmodernist notion of identity politics, it is relevant that a form of critical pedagogy engenders a discussion of student identity as cultivated through media images and use of cultural artifacts, such as films, art, and even video games. For hooks, all cultural criticism must question the dominant hegemonic view imposed on representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality (hooks, 1990). Cultural analysis extends beyond assessment of “good or bad” examples of politics of representation; it demonstrates the manner by which certain details portray a certain politic of identity as positive and others problematic.

As a result, deconstruction of myths and dominant ideologies in cultural artifacts empowers subjects to find embedded forms of pedagogy. Since video games are a new art form, the classical literature in cultural studies does not discuss them. Recently, a few game scholars have loosely taken a Critical Media Studies/Cultural Studies perspective on analyzing the hidden themes in games. Many focus their discussion on the use of games as objects used to informally teach children or cite specific games that show a lack of equal representation in gender and sexuality.

Rebecca Stevenson (2009) further focuses on children's culture as defined in their use of digital video games. She posits that games have become more accessible to younger generations

due to popularity in more variety of games based on general interest and assumptions of gender. Furthermore, she examines how misrepresentation of race, class, and gender in games mislead perceptions and form biases in young gamers. Her suggestions for newer studies involve establishing better critiques of politics of representation, especially in regards to race and gender (Stevenson, 2009). Another games scholar, Adrienne Shaw, describes a necessity for game studies to incorporate a cultural studies framework, thus inferring that video games are cultural artifacts that also reflect sociocultural norms (Shaw, 2010). By researching the existing literature and examining the manner in which scholars and journalists discuss video game culture, Shaw asserts that video game culture should be studied within a cultural studies perspective as opposed to a games in-themselves approach. Expanding on different definitions of culture and cultural studies, Shaw determines that one should study how gameplay is positioned as a culture. Her investigation into game culture consists of subdivisions indicating the identity of the player, her gameplay manner, and the types of games she chooses to play. Her critique of scholarly approaches to gaming communities is that such work tends to essentialize certain communities. For example, studies on female gamers tend to present an essentialized position of how women relate to games (Shaw, 2010). Her solution is to problematize the current masculine gendered notion of the gaming community and indicate how women's voices and presence had been excluded from the community.

In their co-authored article, *What is Game Studies Anyway?*, David Nieborg and Joke Hermes (2008) discuss the interconnections between game studies and cultural studies. Citing Richard Johnson, they initially frame the cultural studies tradition as examining media culture artifacts as manifestations of social relations imbued with power inequalities and social differences. Two important details in the political economy of game production are the

marketing of the game consoles and the relationship between the game production and hardware (game console) production. According to Nieborg and Hermes, game consoles are upgraded every 5 years depending on when new hardware is introduced into the market. Also game console companies market their products for the holiday season and rely heavily on the marketing strategies of a particular game (Nieborg and Hermes, 2008).

Embedded in their assessment are the symbolic equivalence of market investment and games. Thus, games are attributed an abstracted notion of capital, hereby alluding to the relationship between technology and capitalism. Although Nieborg and Hermes (2008) do not refer to Toby Miller's work on game culture and political economy, their description of political economy echoes Miller's emphasis on the waste production and illegal working conditions of certain games. In addition to his concern for the toxic waste material of computers and game software—notably the unsold Atari E.T. games buried in a New Mexico landfill—Miller also examines multinational companies' marketing strategies and monetary investments into games (Miller, 2006). The pervasive factor in game production shows that games are not in-themselves innocent of the political, economic, and social contexts. The interweaving of technology and capitalism allude to Kellner's term, technocapitalism, which denotes the relationship between capitalism and technology and its effects on human relations. Not only does technocapitalism control modes of production and consumption, but it also permeates the cultural artifacts and forms of media. Kellner and Best (2001) posit that technocapitalism refers to the power in technology that coincides with human labor force. Since its influence permeates media culture, it also controls the ways of societal organization and human everyday life (Kellner and Best, 2001; Kellner, 1989).

Marketing strategies in game production maintain a homogenous representation of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In Adrienne Shaw's (2009) article, *Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games*, she uncovers possible reasons for the lack of queer representation in video games. One overarching reason for the homogenization of representation of characters in games is due to the prevalence of masculine heterosexuality in the gaming industry. Shaw's statistics in gamer sexuality indicated a strong majority of self-identified heterosexuals. Despite a small presence of self-identified queers, the gaming industry takes risks in developing games with positive representations of queer characters. Shaw discusses the financial risk of game companies in marketing, selling, and distributing a game with queer characters (Shaw, 2009). David Leonard presents a similar argument concerning gender and racial representations in videogames. The negative stereotypes enforce biases against marginalized people, such as women and people of color. Leonard cites *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as exemplary of negative portrayal of Black and Latino gangs in Los Angeles. He further addresses the sexual portrayal of women and the lack of representation of women of color. Leonard argues that stereotypes provide pleasure for the typical white gamer or anyone succumbing to white supremacy and colorblindness (Leonard, 2006). His final assessment of further investigation of race and gender representation in video games aptly addresses the influence on gamers, especially children. He (2006) states, "Video games teach, inform, and control, mandating our development of tools of virtual literacy to expand pedagogies of games as part of a larger discursive turn to (and within) game studies," (p. 88).

There are studies that examine the representations of the age, gender, and race of video game characters. Williams et al. (2009) use social identity theory to frame their study on the excessive representation of white young male video game characters. Basing their data on the

2000 population census, they assert that women, the elderly and young, and people of color are underrepresented in video games. By conducting content analysis, Williams et al. investigate popular video games and primary and secondary character roles. Similar to Shaw's 2009 study, they cite three explanations for the overrepresentation of white adult male primary characters and an underrepresentation of other marginalized groups. Consumer demand drives the production of video games. Donghee Wohn (2011) discovers a strong presence of female characters in casual games, or games that are easily downloaded onto electronic devices and typically played on smart phones or iPads. Using social learning theory to frame the analysis of character representations and cognitive processing, Wohn executes content analysis of the top 256 downloaded casual games in the two-part study. In both sections of the study, women were portrayed as nonsexual and dominant in the narrative. The dichotomy in representation of women in casual and console games suggests the make-up of consumers according to gender (Wohn, 2011). In their article, *The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games*, Jeroen Jansz and Raynel Martis (2007) sought to uncover the recent trend of dominant female characters in video games. They conducted content analysis of male and female main and supporting characters in successful and popular video games. Out of 12 games, they discovered that the majority of male and female characters were white, but the gender distribution of dominant male and female characters was equal. Jansz and Martis did not find submissive female characters, but they did find male characters, who were victims to other dominant characters (Jansz and Martis, 2007).

While the literature does suggest the efficiency of marketing strategies for popular games, none of them focus specifically on one popular video game or video game series to examine specific ways that the games communicate unequal biases of representation in class,

gender, race, and sexuality, or politics of identity. Also very few indicated specific ways that players could envision the games differently had the game developers included an equal distribution of politics of identity. While it is important to note the politics of representation, few scholars indicated whether it impacted the ways that players perceived the narratives in the games or if indeed that politics of representation was inherent in the narrative itself. For example, I pose whether a character's race and gender not only impacts the manner by which players perceive the story but also the degree by which a character's gender and race become significant to the narrative itself. Since I believe that both results are related, I do include narrative studies as part of my pedagogical model. Even if players are able to perceive the politics of representation in a game without having it impact the way they experience the game narratives, I think that perceiving both the narrative and politics of representation affect that way that video games informally teach players.

## *II. III Narrative Structure*

After investigating the literature of narrative structure, I realize that Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy has a distinct structure that echoes narratives in oral tradition. Narratives in digital format are multiform, following the similar structure in oral stories in which the narrator has the control over which areas to emphasize and which scenes to privilege. Since I live in the time of narrative in written tradition to digital, I also investigated literature elements in written narratives. Themes are prevalent in oral, written, and digital narratives, yet they distinctly arise in oral and digital. Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy has a structure in which themes drive the rest of the elements in narrative. I define themes as those central significant messages that focus the manner by which players perceive plot, character, setting, and digitized artifacts in the

game. By naming the themes in the game, players articulate the underlying messages in the games, making sense of the manner by which they construe the plot twists and character development. By describing different narrative structures, I briefly allude to the precursors of Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, yet I focus primarily on narratives in video games.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle (335 BC/2008) provides a definition for Tragedy as an imitative medium that conveys a serious situation through the form of action not narration. The function of Tragedy is a cathartic medium, one that effectively purges the emotions. Every tragedy has 6 parts: plot, character, diction, thought, song, and spectacle. Since action is crucial to Tragedy, he places plot development as the fundamental part, one that supports the others. Since Tragedy requires agents to engender the actions of the play, characters symbolizing important virtues are another important element. Through a character's speech, an audience member can see the moral development and lessons learned in actions (Aristotle, 335 BC/2008). Not only does Aristotle's structure provide a foundation for an understanding of narrative structure, the function of tragedy still remains current to present day emotional responses to digital narratives. In his investigation of the game narrative structure, Barry Ip (2011, 2011a) recognizes that popular video games elicit pity from the player, referring to an Aristotelian notion of catharsis and the emotional impact of complex narratives arising within players.

Catharsis in video games is not the only example of the relevance of older traditions in digital narratives, as I will further describe in later sections of this chapter. Scholars of narrative in the oral tradition used the term *multiform* to describe performances of epics, which come from oral-story-telling as opposed to a written original form. Albert B. Lord (1964) continued Milman Parry's scholastic investigation of the structure of Homeric epics by examining their context as forms of oral tradition and their form as oral stories that differ from the written tradition. Lord

continued Parry's scholarship, since Parry died prematurely from an accidental gunshot firing (1964). In a book, *The Singer of Tales*, which was previously his doctoral dissertation, Lord followed Parry's theory of oral composition and applied it to *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. Walter Ong (1982) describes Parry's anticipated discovery of the retelling of epics as constructed by methods in oral-storytelling than memorization of words. As Lord describes in *The Singer of Tales*, epic poems or other forms of oral narratives are constructed from formulas and themes (Lord, 1964; Ong 1982). Lord uses Parry's definitions to denote formula, as a group of words that have similar metrical construction used on a regular basis across different oral narratives, and themes as repeated formulas that describe a particular situation (p. 4).

The recitation of oral poems arises not from rote memorization or from free improvisation but from a lexicon integral to the cultural practice of oral story-telling and derives from multiple performances in the oral tradition. Parry and Lord (1964) attempted to inform literary analysis of oral poems to include a critical investigation of the formulas and themes arising in the cultural practices of performing oral epic poems that differ significantly from taking a printed version of *The Illiad* and reading aloud from it. Studying the role of oral tradition in Serbian-Croatian cultural practices, Lord and Parry (1964) realized that each performer created his narrative of an oral poem at each performance. Rather than learning word by word, oral poetry performers, singers or bards learn through repetition, performance of one particular poem or song, and exposure to different performances of epic poems or songs (p. 24).

Offering his need to affect more informed analysis of form in oral narratives, Parry developed the formula as a unit comprising of repeated phrases or words to signify an idea or situation (Lord, 1964). While one can look at formulas as just repeated texts used in different parts of the songs, they are also indicative of the singer's age and experience with different

formulas. Lord (1964) describes that formulas are constructed of thought and relevant song, making the formula an individualistic experience. By linking thought to songs, words and expressions get a certain meter, and the connotation of this expression receives its full effect when future performers perceive its effect from older performers on their audiences. So, formula construction receives its influence from a particular performer's learned lexicon from watching and hearing previous performances. Although formulas are dependent on their cultural context, Lord (1964) mentioned that formulas express key ideas such as main characters, actions, and setting, and more complex actions are more complicated and longer formulas. Formula construction is like using language. The meter and lyrical construction of formulas are like grammar rules, setting up restrictions for the use of them, yet given a set of formulas, one can still formulate a creative construction just like language usage. So, a performer acquires a set of formulas, but he can arrange them in a creative way depending on his feelings (Lord, 1964). There are substitutions for particular words, as Lord cites in his transcription of Serbian-Croatian bards, who might substitute certain words in phrases, yet the phrases can be grouped in systems, or a group of words that show similar meaning and interchangeable use (Lord, 1964, p. 35). So, the analysis of the formulas depends on the singer's use of syllables in his phrases and association of words, yet also one must take into consideration the singer's exposure and personal life.

Like Parry, Lord perceives themes as a group of ideas used on a regular basis across songs. In the case of oral tradition, the themes are more suggestive of important events common to the type of stories in oral tradition that are affected by the manner that the performer understands and constructs the story. Thus, a theme conveys an idea of an event, such as council in the *chanson geste*, *Song of Roland*. Using the song, *Song of Bagdad*, Lord (1964) analyzed

the theme of the council as consisting of smaller themes such as the receipt of a letter about the council and the summoning of the council, which are smaller scenes within the council (p. 71). Lord further describes that performers need to learn different names of people or different details, such as tone and description of clothing or setting to inform the meaning that the performer wants to convey about the themes. Like the development of formulas, themes are individualistic and constructed from the performer's set of skills learned from repetition of performances and exposure to performances when younger. A performer may also spontaneously add a few formulas or details to emphasize a certain feeling that he feels about the theme, as Lord terms such additions as "ornaments," (Lord, 1964, p. 88). Thus, the themes can also take multiple forms, like the expression of formulas, and performers can diversify their performance by adding different ornaments and formulas between their deliveries of themes. The performer has a common lexicon of themes and formulas at his disposal when weaving together events of a story (Lord, 1964). Lord contrasts oral tradition from that of reading a version of an epic poem in a book: "our neatly categorizing minds work differently from the singer's. To him the formulas and themes are always used in association one with another; they are always part of a song. To the singer, moreover, the song has a specific though flexible content," (Lord, 1964, p. 95). Again this description shows that performances of oral stories take different forms, similar to different ways that players play a game. It is interesting that themes arise in oral tradition, yet they are much more basic units of events that gain cultural significance across different tales within a cultural practice or a genre of work such as epic poetry. In contrast, themes take on an underlying position in written literature as the message of the work.

When I researched anthologies of literature to examine narratives in written tradition, I looked at the manner by which the editors discussed elements of fiction. In Robert Scholls, Nancy R. Comley, Carl H. Klaus, and Michael Silverman's 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Elements of Literature: Essay, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Film*, they (1991) describe the elements of fiction as plot, character, meaning, point-of-view, and design<sup>4</sup>. The plot is the action or the sequence of events that bring about a change in a character. The character is a term to describe the people in the story. The story's meaning or theme refers to our subjective experience of a story. A theme or meaning could be realistic or allegorical. The point-of-view is the way a story is told. While this anthology made no mention of first-person, second-person, or third-person perspective, it revealed that tone and metaphor were placed under this category. For example, if a fictional account had a character described in an ironic tone, the tone impacts the point of view of the story. Finally, the design of a story is the structure. Another anthology is Carl Bain, Jerome Beauty, and J. Paul Hunter's 6<sup>th</sup> edition of Norton's *Introduction to Literature*. The editors (1995) describe six elements of literature: plot, point-of-view, characterization, setting, symbols, and theme<sup>5</sup>. Thus, similar to Aristotle's naming of elements in tragic plays, characters and plot

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<sup>4</sup> There are many different ways to structure fiction, but it did specify two main techniques: juxtaposition and repetition. Juxtaposition is the means of putting two characters or actions of characters together to compare or contrast them. Repetition is the repeated sequence of events with variation. The design of a story allows us to see its structure after we have moved past its plot. Readers examine the structure to impact the meaning of the story.

<sup>5</sup> They describe plot as an arrangement of action. There is always a central conflict, but there are five parts to the plot development. First, the exposition is the introduction of the characters, situation, and setting. Second, the rising action shows a complication in the situation, leading to the main conflict of the story. The third part is the climax or turning point in the conflict, or the point where the conflict is most intense. The fourth part is the falling action or a reverse moment in the situation. Finally, the conclusion is the conflict resolution or the point when the situation becomes stable again. Some writers use the flashback or replay of events, while others use plot development to incite curiosity or suspense. The editors' version of point-of-view comprises of focus and voice. The voice is the tone of the story—this part coincides directly with the *Elements of Literature* anthology. On the other hand, focus refers to the perspective that indicates the way readers understand the story. The Norton's anthology also indicated centered or central consciousness, a limited internal view within a character—a tool used in Modernist works. Psychological realism is another perspective in which a character measures reality in terms of his/her perceptions. Characterization is someone who acts the sequence of events. There are different types of characters, such as the hero, villain, protagonist, and antagonist. One can describe characters as being complex or rounded characters, while others may be flat and simple. The editors (1995) define it as “whatever our past, our

are emphasized in narrative. Moral development, as seen in themes in literature, is elaborated in a character's speech, but this differs in written tradition when a combination of factors, such as a character's inner monologue, plot development, setting, and use of symbols explicate the theme. Yet, despite the implication that theme structures the other narrative elements in written narratives as its role is to convey the central meaning of a story, I would suggest that it does not. Characters, plot development, setting and symbols only partly display thematic development, since the emphasis primarily is on structuring plot development to show changes in character.

While there are different definitions of narrative informed by film and digital media, an understanding of the literary narrative structure in written tradition provides foundational understanding of narrative, since students initially learn this structure. By looking at film and digital narrative structure in relation to the two previous types of narrative structure, one perceives its similarities to the previous structure. Any differences among the three structures is attributed to the fact that the latter formats emphasize certain elements that disturb one's understanding of written narrative structure as predominantly linear. Yet, to accept written narrative as only linear or digital narrative as predominantly reoccurring in time loops limits one's understanding of both structures. I uphold that it is better to gain an understanding of all structures, as terms from oral and written are relevant in digital narratives. The main difference I am espousing is that some narrative elements are privileged in certain narrative structures that are not in other structures.

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conditioning, our pattern or previous behavior, we can, by choice, by free will, change all that right this minute," (p.96). I liked this notion of characterization because it made me consider that players might feel that their liminal experience as themselves and Chell is indicative of an existential character. Setting is simply the time and place of a story. The symbol is something that stands for something else. Usually symbols are figurative—or the comparison of two unlike things. Important notions of symbolism in fiction are allegories and myth. While simile and metaphor are easily understandable, an allegory is a type of metaphor when an abstract notion is discussed in a concrete and sensuous way and is extended throughout the entire work. A myth is a story that is entirely symbolic.

In Marsha Kinder's article (2002), *Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever*, she develops the notion of database narrative—a selection of visual data combined in a particular manner to compose a story—to articulate one's interactive and critical engagement with digital media. Framing the human compulsion for narrative with a psychoanalytic perspective, Kinder (2002) affixes the compulsion as a narrative drive, thus giving the energy equal weight of innateness as the death or libidinal drives. The human sensory apparatus—one's ability to hear, smell, see, or touch—allows us to create stories regardless of our abilities to edit and revise these stories. Kinder refers to this ability as similar to Freud's notion of the unconscious in dreams. Comprising of three elements, hot spots, characters as avatars, and desire-driven, limitless, repetitious, and random plot development, database narratives allow the visual and auditory imagery to infuse live into the characters and drive the sequence of events. The three elements, hot spots, avatars, and narrative fields, show a decentering of traditional elements of narrative (Kinder, 2002). Most applicable to Bunuel's films and adventure quest games, this formulation of narrative still refers to plot, symbolism, and characters in traditional literary tropes. In further examining Kinder's narrative structure, I perceive subversion of plot, character, and use of symbolism in objects. Thus, instead of naming plot, character, and use of symbols as the components of narrative in film and digital narratives, Kinder renames them according to a newer purpose they have as hot spots, avatars, and narrative fields that differ from the functions of their antecedents.

Furthermore, Lev Manovich's (2001) notion of database narrative, a type of interactive narrative in which the digital media user accesses one algorithmic path, resolves the differences between traditional narrative and a database. He emphasizes that the narrative features are evident in a database narrative, yet the digital media user selects the narrative elements from a

larger pool of available choices (Manovich, 2001). Attempting to resolve the contrast between database and narrative, Manovich expresses that both exist in forms of digital media. While narrative forms exist in digital media, its organization still reveals an underlying database<sup>6</sup>. The technique of the loop in digital media and digital cinema also reinforces the database narrative. In contrast to a linear narrative, the loop shows a repetitive scene, which is interrupted once a viewer presses a button to display other filmed shots, thus creating a new narrative form inspired by viewers' interpretations of the protagonist's actions and motives. While Manovich leaves the opposition open to readers' interpretation, I think that database narrative captures a hybridized form of traditional narrative, one that borrows selective features from its predecessor. Like the spectator's interaction with the computerized art project, players' interactivity with the game depicts a fusion of character and plot in which the player directly affects.

The progression of narratives in the oral, written, and digital traditions depicts a paradoxical notion. While they differ in emphasizing certain elements over another in one format, each narrative element retains its function yet in a newer subversive manner from its antecedent. In the example of the repetitive loop in digital media, it retains the notions of character and plot even though the loop shows a brief view of a character's actions and the linearity of time is subverted. By renaming the narrative format database narrative, Manovich rearticulates an older form to make sense of how viewers or players express their understanding

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<sup>6</sup> He uses Roland Barthes' theory of semiology to demonstrate the difference between traditional narrative forms in literature and cinema and its differences in digital media. He discusses the syntagm, a linear sequence of words that have a material presence, such as a written description of articles of clothing. Syntagm refers to the imagery of those items. Paradigm, however, is a concept that refers to the unspoken items that relate to those articles of clothing; it conveys different associations of those items that the speaker does not utter. In literature and cinema, the syntagm includes words, sentences, scenes, and shots that viewers and readers perceive, while paradigm alludes to the other written or visual material not included in the final edits of the book or film. Digital media reverses this relationship. Since its organization is based on a database, the possibility of choices becomes evident and explicit, while the linear narrative is hidden and implicit in the minds of the users. In video games, this relationship makes sense. The open availability of choices is similar to the database, and the different trajectories (the paradigm) are revealed to the player. The specific narrative is dependent on the gameplay and player's intentions and perspectives, so its meaning is hidden and virtual (Manovich, 2001).

of narrative. Not only does the narrative structure change, yet the manner by which the players understand the sequence of character and plot also changes, perhaps making their newer conceptualizations of character and plot distinct from how they arise in the novel. In the video game format, narrative structure is highly dependent on the genre. I have selected the *Portal* video game series as one to focus on the manner that narrative elements such as plot, character, and theme arise and interconnect to make the player experience and understand the narrative.

#### *II.IV. Narratives in Video Games*

In her highly influential book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray (1997) introduces a new notion of narrative in video games and terms it multiform story, a story that can have multiple directions based on the agency of the user. This notion depicts hypertextual features and postmodernist features in films and novels. Thus, multiform stories do not only exist in video games, rather, video games share a departure of linear narrative with novels such as *Ulysses* and films such as “*Groundhog’s Day*”. Murray indicates that puzzle adventure game convey dramatic storytelling through slower pace involved in puzzle solving (Murray, 1997).

Upholding a belief that video game narratives are not cumulative like those in narratives in novels and in films, Murray (1997) asserts that they are create a new conceptualization of narrative itself. Her conceptualization of narratives consists of her 4 criteria for digital media: procedural, spatial, participatory, and encyclopedic. Procedural refers to a programmable action that is heavily rules-based. The computer relies heavily on user-interaction, since it requires a command in order to execute a task thus alluding to its participatory criteria. Video games function in a very similar manner. A player interacts with the game and renders an action through the game-playing device, and the console fulfills the action and its consequential actions

following the player's decision. Encyclopedic refers to the computer or game console's ability to store large amounts of information. By referring to Vannegar Bush's influential "memex" concept, she illustrates that the Internet can allow users to organize data and leave a trail for future researchers. Games are similar in that their databases store a wide variety of any player's different choices in gameplay (Murray, 1997). Or, given a narrative perspective, a game's story or narrative comprises of a retelling of the trajectory of a player's actions and computer's programmable reactions throughout the game. Digital media are immersive, since they invite players or users into spatial environment. Murray's four criteria depend on one another—spatial exploration refers to a player's level of participation with the game (Murray, 1997).

Furthermore, Murray presents a digital media narrative model called, the labyrinth, a model in which the player is immersed in a linear or open-ended maze in an adventure or puzzle game with a theme on survival and salvation. One type of labyrinth narrative is the open-ended rhizome model, derived from Gilles Deleuze's notion of the rhizome root that explains a nonlinear structure with no beginning or end. The model of the narrative as labyrinth structure can include digital media, or media that provide kaleidoscopic views on a particular subject. The rhizome illustrates the flow of ideas that stream from one to another without boundaries or conclusions. This model demonstrates the open-ended navigation in story sequence in postmodernist novels and hypertextual literature. Yet, other interesting ideas emphasize a reconceptualization of older genres in narrative into video game contexts (Murray, 1997).

Another important detail in Murray's notion of digital media narrative is her reconceptualization of symbolic drama as a description of narratives with the following components: a protagonist's encounter with a problem, a challenge, a difficult antagonist, life-threatening risk, and confusing world, and resolves with the protagonist's triumph over the

conflict. This defines the central plot of the game series, and in such narratives, objects in the game function as symbolic language to give players embodied experiences. While the narrative and objects in the narrative are on screen, they provide players with agency to solve the conflict and learn a new solution to a puzzle or on a symbolic level, perceive the manner by which the narrative reflects situations in reality (Murray, 1997).

According to Murray, the player does not author the narrative of the game, rather, they exercise agency. The game develops procedural authorship, or the creative ability to write labyrinth structured narrative using rules-based algorithmic language. Nonetheless, a player's agency in their embodiment with game characters connects to a player's sense of identity, especially in her way of constructing narrative by rendering a particular trajectory through gameplay (Murray, 1997).

Yet, after analyzing literary analysts on the types of plot, Murray (1997) notes that all stories cycle a certain number of plot types (love, conquest, growth), but they present it in different ways. Thus, each plot is devised from a series of themes that are combined into morphemes, or basic units. Using Vladimir Propp's notion of morphemes in Russian fairy-tales, Murray describes them as a combination of thematic elements that structure the plot. Oral storytelling and formulaic stories may use a hero's journey for self-discovery theme, yet the plot of this rendition depends on the way different morphemes, or smaller thematic units, construct it. Thus, an electronic storyteller functions in a similar manner. Alluding to the procedural authorship, Murray describes the plot design as dependent on a story genre, such as an American Western game or science fiction game. Murray presents that procedural authorship must create characters who follow certain rules given a plot structure, yet the authors script different commands based on different motivations of the character (Murray, 1997). While she alludes to

Propp's morphemes, I perceive that her decision to discuss the relevance of his work on oral storytelling pertains to her focus on plot. In contradistinction to her, I had previously provided details on Lord and Parry's work due to their focus on thematic development in oral storytelling, a feature that I expand upon while talking about narratives in digital format.

Another influential games narrative scholar, Espen Aarseth (1997) describes his notion of cybertext as a perspective on text that addresses digital media in addition to older forms of text in order to impact literary theory. He asserts that adventures games and digital media engender new ways of thinking about literary theory; one cannot simply extrapolate concepts from literary theories and apply them directly to digital media text without modification of the concepts. Aarseth further explains the ambiguity of linear narrative in relation to hypertext. While referring to Roland Barthes' concept of tmesis (or skipping some parts of text when reading), Aarseth (1997) mentions that codex literature, or literature in book format, does not always allow for linear narrative. A reader has the choice to skip sections and to skim some passages in addition to spending more time poring over other sections of the book. Using Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* as an example of a hypertext novel, Aarseth (1997) also clarifies the notion of interactivity. He suggests that many use the term to describe electronic literature and hypertexts, since it requires a user or reader to determine the direction of the story. Yet, books are also interactive in that they elicit cognitive processing from the reader. Moreover, hypertexts or electronic literature also incorporates linear narrative, if one perceives that a reader achieves one direction in reading a text even when presented with the potential of multiple paths (Aarseth, 1997). Aarseth seems to invoke some of Barthes' ideas on the horizontal and vertical nature of stories when he discusses the interactive nature of book reading and linearity of hypertexts. Roland Barthes (1966) asserts that each narrative has an essential foundational block, such as the

sentence, and also a hierarchical structure, or the meaning or psychological impact of a narrative. Using Todorov's distinction of a story and a discourse, Barthes describes the story as the actual chain of events and characters involved in the actions, while the discourse involves the mode of telling the story, or the story's grammatical features.

Barthes (1966) aptly describes the structure of narratives that best explains Aarseth's articulation of Barthes' work,

To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of a story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys,' to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative 'thread' on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next, (p. 87).

Resuming to Aarseth, his significant contribution to literary theory and video games literature is his reconceptualized literary concepts. He gives the term ergodic, to describe the text involved in games, such as a football game. He gives literary tropes such as aporia, epiphany, intrigue, and intrigues new conceptualizations. For instance, aporia is the fragmentation or pause one experiences in ergodic literature that does not allow her access to the entire whole of the game. After the aporia, there is the epiphany, or the revelation of a way out of being stuck. Aarseth explains that the aporia and epiphany pair constructs hypertext fiction derived from a human experience, which creates narrative (Aarseth, 1997). His assessment proves the manner by which narrative can describe the player's reflection of the game. If one goes with Aarseth's conceptualization, one perceives that games might not be considered traditional narratives, but they are narratives that incorporate the player's reflection about the gameplay (Aarseth, 1997).

Indicating other scholars' use of plot structure in codex format to adventure games as hegemonic, he claims that the narrative structure is unique and demands new ways of thinking about plot structure and character. He borrows a term from drama called *intrigue*, a term meaning an event that necessitates an actor's ignorance to a situation or gullibility to the events (Aarseth, 1997). In games, the player is innocent of the meaning of the events in the gameplay, a notion which differs significantly from readers reading different events in a book and concluding its meaning at its end. The player embodies the role of the main character and narratee, a notion Aarseth terms *intrigue*. Aarseth explains that the main character is rendered dead as the player assumes her identity through the actions and navigation in the multidimensional space. The setting and character are subsumed under the role of the *intriguee*. Aarseth terms *ergodic* discourse the log of events constituted by gameplay, a notion that differs from the narrative log of plot and character (Aarseth, 1997).

Working from a background in comparative literature and knowledge in game development, Ian Bogost (2006) proposes that cultural analysts use the "unit," or thematic element in a cultural artifact, to properly develop any hidden ideologies or meanings within that particular artifact. Unit analysis comprises of many "unit operations" or actions that use different inputs and transform the action. Bogost develops his notion of unit analysis by taking into account Aarseth's (1997) notion of *cybertext*, or the perspective on text that addresses digital media in addition to older forms of text in order to impact literary theory, and Murray's notion of *procedural authority*. Bogost illustrates unit analysis in his description of the film, "The Terminal" and uses the theme of waiting to show how it develops in different contexts within the film. Another apt example is the unit operation of "chance encounters" as it originates in modernist French poetry, such as in Charles Baudelaire's notion of the *flaneur*,

through Charles Bukowski's contemporary poetry, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film, "Amelie," and Will Wright's game, *The Sims* (Bogost, 2006). Baudelaire established the notion of the flaneur, an urban aesthete who holds deep fascination with strangers, hence this notion became part of a cultural memory and a theme for future literary works. Manifesting itself in Amelie and the open-ended exploratory game, *The Sims*, the "chance encounter" takes a new cultural value in a video game form, since players exert agency on whether they wish to remain urban strangers<sup>7</sup>. Bogost's discussion of player agency in the Sims correlates to Murray's description of player agency in game narrative. Bogost (2006) wants to use unit analysis as a way to compare cultural media. In efforts to put the luddology vs. narratology fight to rest, he argues for both by proposing unit analysis. Since unit analysis uses unit operations, or formal rules-based mathematical codes to run a game, any analysis of a game's critical ideology or hidden narrative element also connects to its formal qualities. Since coding is based on mathematical formulas and algorithms, a game developer can use similar coding information for games of the same genre. For Bogost, a cultural analyst must consider intellectual property in their analysis of a game and what that game expresses (Bogost, 2006). Game developers produce similar game

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<sup>7</sup> In Baudelaire's sonnet, *A une passante*, he describes a chance encounter in an urban setting. His notion of the flaneur demonstrates a complex emotion of deep fascination with a stranger and a simultaneous need to distance oneself from that stranger. Bogost mentions that Baudelaire's sonnet instantiates the notions of the flaneur and the chance encounter into cultural memory. For this reason, Charles Bukowski's poem, *A woman on the street*, mirrors the same fascination with a female stranger. The poems show a narrator's choice to get closer to a stranger, yet the narrators do not choose to get closer to her. Jeunet's film, *Amelie*, depicts a young woman who develops stratagems, or puzzles to keep her distance from a fascinating male stranger, with whom she has a chance encounter. Bogost further suggests that her stratagems allow her to re-experience the distance with her love-interest in different ways, thus continuing the modernist trope of the chance encounter. In his explanation of *The Sims*, Bogost states that the game allows for a similar chance encounter through the procedural quality of the digital environment. The setting is in an urban type setting, where players have the opportunities to look at different players' avatars. The difference is that the game has built in coding system that allows players to choose to interact with the strangers. Through the embodied experience of the avatar, the player thinks about both the possible interaction through his/her character as well as the limitations and advantages of the game itself. Thus, *The Sims* further extends the cultural symbol of the chance encounter, yet it offers the player (or narrator if one considers that s/he is narrating his/her actions after gameplay) the chance to change it—a different quality than the poems and film.

engines that render a physical space particular to one game, yet other game developers can use this same game engine to modify it to produce other games.

Some portions of games studies want to study it for its technical determinist perspective, while others, like Bogost, want to address what technology says about human culture. He also uses Murray's notion of procedural authority to structure his discussion of videogames and expression. It is better to study a game's formal qualities in terms of its units, not necessarily essentialist rules-based or narrative within the game. Yet, Bogost reformulates the issues of narrative in games by stating that games could allow for narrative through its drama management (Bogost, 2007). Games might tell stories, yet the narratives are only part of the meaning-making experience. In reference to ideology, Bogost further elaborates that games allow for subjective experiences, so some players can interpret the game's rules as allowing them to unveil a certain ideology. If one perceives it as a narrative, however, it is dangerous because it limits the experience of the game. In response, he proposes that the unit analysis of different blocks allows for meaning. The player's subjective understanding of a game's rules pertains to the story that the player constructs. For Bogost, simulations offer players a way to think about their subjectivity in the form of procedural choices. One can analyze their gameplay after they play the game, thus recounting her experiences of the game as a narrative. The player's own interpretation of the unit operations within the game alludes to this form of subjectivity. Bogost (2006) states, "this kind of subjectivity becomes manifest in the space between the unit operations the game allows, and the conceptual understanding of the gameplay process," (p. 109).

In his analysis of both "procedural" and "rhetoric," Bogost (2007) alludes to traditional meanings and current uses of the terms. His notion of procedural rhetoric builds on previous

notions of visual and digital rhetoric—the former pertains to the persuasive nature of visual culture, such as in advertising. The latter refers to the manner by which new media (computational media) guides users to gain knowledge on a particular subject. Thus, Bogost uses procedural rhetoric to describe the cultural expression in different digital media mediated by a user's interaction. Video games are perfect examples, since their software can hold lots of visual and coding data. A simulated representation, such as a player's interaction with a video game, presents a vivid experience, since the player embodies a character and sorts through visual information—this is most likely the case with games that use 3D rendering. Thus, a game's procedural rhetoric alludes to games that express a perspective on cultural phenomena by using a player's interaction and certain algorithms (Bogost, 2007). While persuasive games can be serious in nature, serious games have certain goals within particular contexts, such as an educational context, and the games allow for players to use the game to better understand the context. Persuasive games, however, convey critical messages about a particular cultural context, and the player gains insight about the real world upon reflecting on the gameplay.

Throughout my discussion of narrative structure and learning through narratives, I reveal the central components in narratives that comprise of thematic units. Not only do these thematic units include certain sets of actions and characters to communicate the central component of the unit, the message in each theme becomes a necessary subject of study. Themes are described as units of ideas in oral tradition, moral lessons that impact character development and reveal significance in plot development in written literature, and algorithmic units in digital media that metonymically convey combined actions with a specified purpose. Each format builds upon the previous structure, yet I am emphasizing the ways that the narrative elements are reconceptualized in digital format since video games follow this format. Moreover, the themes

are no longer simply immaterial but experienced through the players' interactions with the plot. Due to the pervasive nature of thematic development in games, I am spending time unraveling the content in themes both in their narrative function and function as carriers of ideological content. As a result, I build my pedagogical model, Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, to examine conduct a dual investigation. Using my model, players and students can better formulate better analyses in terms of the story's form, yet also they can analyze the manner by which this form conveys the ideological content. By examining both the ideological content and deeper meanings conveyed in the themes, themes become both a formal unit and conveyors of content that show the pervasive methodology of video games. By explicating the analysis in my model in the next chapters, I show that thematic content is dependent on the player, yet a well written game can allow for multiplicity in the way players interpret a broad theme that players name in different iterations. Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy is a form of learning that impacts both developments in narrative structure yet also the content embedded in the form of themes. Moreover, students can then analyze the manner by which the newer format of themes affects the way that they understand the narrative itself as well as the manner that ideological content becomes more pervasive through the immersive quality of the games. Nonetheless, video games are only another reiteration of previous media, such as films and TV shows, that allowed viewers to take a more passive role. My pedagogical model examines the novel way that video games allow for a re-experiencing of stories with similar themes and tropes.

I aim to elaborate on several important themes are the following: sublimation of the death drive, sadist relationship between Chell and GLaDOS in *Portal 1: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*, exploration of space, and the personification of humans onto artificial intelligence. These major themes break into smaller inter-related themes, such as the smaller theme of gender depiction of

power articulates the larger theme of the personification of humans onto artificial intelligence. Moreover, the themes interconnect, thus establishing coherence yet difficulty in articulating and distinguishing them from each other. In addition, this pedagogical model also interrelates the game, the player, and the gameplay experience in order to bridge the cultural artifact, subject, and phenomena to show the way that the phenomenon itself—gameplay experience that lends itself to a particular reading of the game narrative—allows one to understand the artifact itself and subject's identity. Thus, instead of only having the subject and artifact inform the narrative, the narratives that players perceive also elucidates the way they articulate their identities and aspects of the game series. Furthermore, the reciprocal relationships among the artifact, subject, and phenomenon define the types of discussions that Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy facilitates. By teasing apart the themes in the narrative, players not only understand the narrative itself but the ways by which their particular insights affirm their identities, connecting pedagogy to identity.

## *Chapter III*

### *Methods*

Borrowing from a cultural studies framework, my dissertation project is comprised of two parts: textual analysis and audience reception. To briefly recapitulate, Doug Kellner's multiperspectival approach combines theoretical concepts from literary theory, psychoanalysis, critical race and gender studies, film theory, and Marxist theory. Within his approach, there are three components to studying a media artifact: political economy, textual analysis, and audience reception (Kellner, 1995). For the first part of the dissertation, I analyzed the *Portal* game series and give my interpretation of its narrative elements. In the audience reception portion of the study, I followed a phenomenological approach to gather other interpretations of the *Portal* series' narrative elements.

#### *III.1 Textual Analysis Portion of the Dissertation*

I offer an analysis of the game series' narrative elements and critical analysis of the politics of representation, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, of the main characters. To better explain my approach in this section, I used literary analysis because I want to show that the game has narrative elements, which prove that the game has educational value in literature contexts. To provide definitions of literary elements, I include Charles Bazerman's (2006) discussion of literary analysis as comprising of plot, character, theme, point of view, and setting. This form of analysis also incorporates criticism of politics of identity and representation (Bazerman, 2006), a form of analysis that is very similar to Kellner's method in textual analysis of a media artifact (Kellner, 1995).

After consulting a range of classical and postmodernist literature on fiction, I develop some key narrative/story elements that I want to address in my interpretation of the Portal game series. Classical texts, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, address plot and character as central to Tragedy among other categories (Aristotle, 335 B.C./2008). Anthologies on literature and descriptions of literary analysis focus on plot, character point-of-view, setting, theme, symbols, meaning, and design (Bazerman, 2006; "Elements of literature: essay, fiction, poetry, drama, film"; "Norton introduction to literature"). Literature on video games focuses on plot design, characters, setting, and events (Dickey, 2006). Moreover, some game scholars use a more simplistic literary theoretical model to describe narrative structure as comprising of situation, character, and form (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Even in film and digital media studies, recent formulations of database narrative—a selection of visual data combined in a particular manner to compose a story—comprise of postmodernist notions of plot, character, and themes. Such subversions of traditional narrative elements reinforce the presence of narrative elements, even in their decentered manner (Kinder, 2002.)

Therefore, I emphasize themes and symbols as they intersect with plot, character, point-of-view and setting. Even if narrative elements in video games are decentered, I explain how the narrative elements depict this decentering. I deconstruct the game to find how the contradictions and ambiguities in plot development further demonstrate its narrative structure and hidden meanings (Burbules and Warnick, 2006). I also look at visual elements within the game, such as signs, posters, and drawings, to discuss their meaning in the games. My experience in playing as the protagonist and interacting with the antagonist through my embodiment of the protagonist is also a crucial factor in my analysis.

### *Use of Psychoanalytic Lens in a Literary Theory Context*

My own interpretation of the game narrative uses the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive as repetition and sublimation of the libidinal and death drives. For instance, I argue that a core theme in the game and successful accomplishment of the puzzles involves the repetition of a sublimated death. Thus, I borrow from a combination of Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze's discussion of both concepts to reconstruct my own formulation of their concepts to apply my analysis. Lacan and Deleuze pose insightful critiques of Freud's work, yet their work also reflects a reinstatement of Freud's concepts. Moreover, both thinkers are highly influential in literary studies and cinema and media studies—the parent division of game studies. Thus, their contribution to my analysis of the game narrative elements seems fitting. Moreover, I am also using Lacan's discussion of Antigone to refer to my analysis of the relationship between Chell and GLaDOS, the protagonist and antagonist respectively. In doing so, I am comparing a classical text to a digital one, thus bringing out the value of literacy in the latter for the purpose of its educational implications.

Since psychoanalytic perspectives are not referenced often in game studies, I am using it to analyze the game narrative to give it another perspective and resolve the gap in the game studies literature. Moreover, Douglas Kellner's multiperspectival approach to cultural studies borrows from psychoanalysis from a literary theoretical perspective, thus I am only expanding on this part of his multiperspectival approach. My interpretation is important to reinforce my positionality in the project. I am a female gamer, who has an interest in literary theory and cultural studies, a perspective that can inform scholarship in educational research concerning video games.

### *III.II Phenomenology Approach/Audience Reception*

The audience reception part of my research project follows a phenomenological approach in qualitative research design<sup>8</sup>. Initially, I had intended on a blended narrative and phenomenological approach, since the definitions for both approaches were similar to each other. The difference between the two arises in the data analysis: narrative inquiry focuses on one's life, whereas phenomenology uses the participants' life accounts to generate significant themes. Max Van Manen's approach includes the experiences of the researcher in conjunction to the experiences of the participants, since phenomenology is a philosophy that explains for the intersubjective nature to experience (Van Manen, 1990). Thus, a combination of my own interpretation and others' interpretations of the narrative elements and embedded ideologies in the game series is necessary to include as part of my study to factor the intersubjective aspect to this approach. Moreover, this reasoning coincides with the audience reception part of the cultural studies approach.

As I will show in the literature review in this section, phenomenological studies focuses on different accounts of an experience in order to look for ways to better understand its different manifestations of its essence. Originally a philosophical approach, phenomenology in social science research is an exploration of a common essence among a group of individuals who share an experience, such as trauma, grief, chess-playing, or even married life during graduate school (Cresswell, 2013). A researcher gives a description on the subjective experiences of each participant as well as an objective description on the common features of the participants' experience. Also, the researcher records her perspectives and experiences and brackets them as

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<sup>8</sup> Just to clarify, I am using a form of phenomenology that differs from the philosophical tradition as previously described in my explanation of Heidegger's essay in Chapter I. I am using Max Van Manen's approach, which uses ideas from the philosophical tradition in application of social research. This approach aims to get the essence of an activity through an investigation of how other participants engage in it as opposed to questions of ontology and epistemology.

to not give bias during the research process. Creswell cites four philosophical perspectives in phenomenological research: a return to the classical quest for wisdom, a suspension of all judgments on what is considered real, refusal of subject-object dichotomy, and the intentionality of consciousness. Data collection includes interviews, observations, journaling, poetry, and art from a small number of participants. Data analysis consists of looking at the interviews and observations and locating certain themes that later become the essential traits qualifying the phenomenon. Then, the researcher writes a descriptive concluding passage on the common “essence” of the participants’ experiences (Cresswell, 2013).

Other researchers have also used the phenomenological approach either in their theoretical framework and/or interviewing and data analysis methods. In my observation of my research for this literature, I noticed that health science researches used this approach to study the phenomenon of specific illnesses and medical conditions, such as ovarian cancer and neonatal conditions, and different coping mechanisms for patients and caregivers (Murdoch and Franck, 2011; Guenther, Stiles, & Champion, 2012). In one study concerning the experiences of a caregiver and his wife’s critical health condition, Todres and Galvin (2008) develop a notion of embodied interpretation to indicate the phenomenon of interpreting another person’s story or experience through one’s intuitive sense. They describe the intuitive sense as “bodily sense,” a process of checking the sensation of one’s body to accurately interpret someone else’s experience, thus alluding to the intersubjective quality to phenomenological research.

In educational contexts, Breidenstein (2007) uses a phenomenological approach to his ethnographic study on boredom and students’ experiences and notions of boredom during class. In sociological contexts, Abuya, Onsomu, Moore, and Sagwe (2012) provide a study that aims to inform audiences on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment among teenaged girls in Kenya.

Their main goal is to show the interconnection among such factors such as sexual harassment, societal views of the feminine gender, and the spread of venereal diseases. In philosophical and literary contexts, Van Manen and Adams (2006) examine the phenomenon of online writing and identity formation during the process of online writing. Borrowing from post-structuralist theories and expanding on metaphors of Greek mythologies, they show a more theoretical application to the everyday experience of online writing.

Max Van Manen's approach best suits my appeal towards a more philosophical and literary contexts. His approach to phenomenological research methodology follows a hermeneutic or interpretative perspective. His definition of phenomenological approach to the human sciences is to focus on human lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. These lived experiences offer us conscious access to the essence of that phenomenon—the phenomenon has a particular essence, but humans experience it differently through their conscious activities in the world. He clarifies that research on lived experiences entails reflection on that particular experience. One cannot reflect on an experience as one experiences it, since the act of reflection changes the experience itself (Van Manen, 1990).

After capturing a researcher's own experience of a phenomenon, the researcher must gather other perspectives of the phenomenon in order to better understand its essence. Van Manen (1990) describes various ways—the life story, classical literature, observed behaviors, autobiographies, diaries, reflective writing, visual and audio art—to gather other perspectives. Once a researcher gathers other perspectives on the phenomenon through the aforementioned methods, the researcher develops themes. These themes are derived by analyzing the whole text or by examining sections and analyzing these sections or going into further line-by-line detail. Themes give shape, content and limitations to the phenomenon and express human willingness

and desire to make sense of something larger than human understanding of it (Van Manen, 1990).

My main reason for conducting a phenomenological study is to generate interpretations of the Portal series' narrative elements and ideologies. While my interpretation is valid, it is important to see how others compare and contrast to my viewpoint. I chose a small sample of participants because I wanted a deeper conversation with these participants. It is not enough that a hundred people perceive that the games have narrative elements; it is more insightful to see the manner by which the game reveals it to players. If the players indicate the games' narrative elements, it will convey educational implications for literature classes as well as critical media literacy. This is important since many students are playing video games, and some video games do demonstrate educational value, especially in terms of conveying interactive narratives.

### *Participants*

My participants were players who at least played *Portal 2*, since this game holds a lot of the narrative elements. Other ideal qualities include legal age, knowledge of the basic elements of fiction (plot, character, setting), and willingness to engage in an interview.

For my interviews, I received a sample of 18 players in order to achieve an in-depth discussion of the game narratives. Much of the literature on phenomenological studies indicates this number of participants selected for in depth interviews (Cresswell, 2013; Murdoch and Franck, 2011; Guenther, Stiles, & Champion, 2012; Abuya, Onsomu, Moore, & Sagwe, 2012). While I initially posted my flyers in different departments of one local community college and local universities, scouted several YouTube channels to get Portal players, and advertised my study in a video game analysis class, I only received a handful of participants.

In January 2014, I contacted 7 *Portal* players through YouTube after having watched their video walkthroughs of *Portal: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*. To give some context to YouTube and walkthroughs, I briefly explain YouTube as a website in which users can “Broadcast themselves” in different forms—video blogs (vlogs) and artistic amateur videos—yet the majority of videos from their study revealed remediation, or repurposing, of traditional media (Burgess and Green, 2009). In particular, I observed for enjoyable videos that cited the games as having both immersive gameplay and awesome story. The significance for scanning walkthroughs is twofold: the reasons cited confirm my hypothesis that the *Portal* game series has narrative elements, and it is feasible to gather participants for my study by asking the YouTuber directly. My observation of the walkthroughs was brief, since my main reasons for looking at YouTube walkthroughs was conducted with the purpose of recruiting participants and to examine the language used in describing the games. Regarding the walkthroughs, I observed whether or not the player mentions “narrative,” “story,” or “the game shows clever writing.” In regards to the latter term, if the game shows clever writing, it indicates that the writing of the game refers to the narrative.

Yet, in my search for YouTube vloggers, only one person responded to my research inquiry. After trying to join the *Portal 2* forum and Gamespot forum, I could get responses from forum administrators, who approve inquiries prior to posting on forums. By February 2014, I began posting flyers to different colleges and universities in the greater Los Angeles area. I had designed my flyer using a Word formatted document specifically intended for the 8.5 x 11 page flyer with little slips of paper at the bottom of the page intended for students to rip off, similar to flyers advertising apartments or jobs. My flyer was titled in big black letters, “Do You Play Video Games,” and underneath it in smaller font listed the questions, “Do you wish you could

talk about your insights about gaming? Did you know that talking about it could further research?” Below the questions were two pictures, one from *Portal: Still Alive* and the other from *Portal 2*. The first one shows the iconic picture of the cake taken from the scene right before Chell/the player confronts the fire pit. The other picture shows Chell aiming her portal gun at the recently reawakened GLaDOS. I put my contact information and participant criteria underneath the pictures. Underneath my contact information, I briefly described that I would interview students from 30 minutes to an hour should they feel compelled to participate given that they met the criteria. Then, I placed my IRB approval case number.

During late March and early April 2014, I acquired permission from social sciences, art and media departments, chemistry and engineering, and humanities departments to post my flyers on their bulletin boards. After posting in the aforementioned departments in a community college in the San Gabriel area, a CalState University and one University of California, I received 5 participants, one participant joining my study through word of mouth. This is an example of snowball sampling, or the process of asking current participants during the interviews for referrals for other participants (Cresswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

I used snowball sampling to get other interviews during May 2014, after having transcribed the 5 interviews I had conducted. Seeking advice from a colleague researcher and lecturer from a private university in California, I gave him my flyer, which he later forwarded to the Game Studies and Computer Science departments. Within moments, I received about 20 emails from students interested in participating in my study, thus I was able to meet my quota of 15-20 initial interviews.

### *Interviews*

According to Merriam, semi-structured interviews include questions as a loose set of instructions for generating specific data from respondents. Nonetheless, these questions must elicit specific responses from the participants. Good interview questions generate responses on sensory experiences as well as opinions and behavior, thus I did not ask questions eliciting a “yes-no” answer (Merriam, 2009). An estimate of 25 participants initially contacted me through email. When I ensured that they met the criteria, I emailed them my interview questions. If they were still interested in participating, the participant and I arranged a time to meet in person or through Skype. When I selected 18 participants, I used semi-structured interviews so that the participant and I simultaneously addressed specific topics while engaging in more of a conversation rather than research.

Out of my 18 interviews, 10 were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded by using QuickTime software. Two participants opted to email me their answers to my questions, and 7 participants preferred talking with me over Skype. A few of the participants, who wanted to interview through video, used the video option while the others chose to maintain their privacy and only used audio communication. I received permission to audio-record these interviews as well by using QuickTime software. While I preferred meeting the students in person, I was flexible to accommodate my participants by using Skype. Kozinets (2010) indicates that netnographic interviews give the researcher the open option of conducting online and face-to-face interviews. While he does indicate phone and email interviews as being helpful, Skype interviews allow for optimal interaction, especially if people have the video exchange. Thus, I find that my research bridged methods between the traditional way of getting data and the new method. A few times, I had to clarify that the background noise, such as family members loudly talking in the other room or my sister’s dog entering the room, but I found my participants

equally engaging and intellectually curious over Skype as they were in person. After transcribing my interviews and looking for overarching themes within the way that the subjects experienced the narrative, I only focused on 5-7 interviews based on their relevance of their themes to my themes and their perception of politics of representation in the story. Listed below are my interview questions.

### Interview Questions

1. What is your highest level of education?
2. What is your major?
3. Tell me about your experience of playing Portal 1 and Portal 2?
4. Do you like the games? Why or why not?
5. Tell me about what you think about the story in the game? Do you think there are action/plot, characters, setting, and use of symbols? If so, how would you describe them?
6. Do you think there are any hidden ideas or themes in the story? If so, what are these themes?
7. Did you think there was a strong representation of women in the games? Why or why not?
8. Did you think that the games critiqued class structure (wealthy class, middle-class, poor class) in any way? How?
9. Did you think that any of the characters are sexualized in any way or is their way of relating to each other sexualized? If so, how?
10. Do you think the games did a good job portraying different races? Why or why not?
11. What are your thoughts concerning the violence in the game? Do you think the games are violent? Why or why not?
12. What are your thoughts (if any) on playing as Chell?
13. What are your thoughts on GLaDOS and Wheatley? How did their dialogue with you affect your gameplay and your understanding of the story?

14. How does the first person perspective help you engage in the gameplay and story?
15. What other games do you play?
16. How long have you been playing video games?
17. What type of games do you like to play?
18. Do you think that the Portal video game series teaches players beyond solving puzzles? Why or why not?

## Chapter IV

### *Findings: Sublimation of the Death Drive<sup>9</sup>: Affirming Life or Death?*

In this chapter, I show two themes of my interpretation of the narrative as a quest for survival in which love and life are intertwined with death and destruction. In particular, I discuss the psychoanalytic concept of death drive as repetition, sublimation of the death drive, and the homoerotic sadist relationship between GLaDOS and Chell/the player. As I explain the themes, I also show how the characters, setting, and symbols in iconography, point-of-view, and plot work together to demonstrate the themes. I reconstruct Lacan and Freud's notions of the death drive and sublimation to ground my analyses of the two themes. When I explain the two themes, I present how the games use the protagonist and antagonist to represent an alternative view of gender and sexuality, thus raising critical awareness as to how games function as public pedagogy. By contrasting the norm of feminine passive gender and heteronormative sexuality, the *Portal* games function as progressive mass media artifacts that showcases alternative representations of gender and sexuality while not being didactic. By examining the life and death theme and its relationship to the homoerotic relationship between Chell and GLaDOS, one perceives that this theme leads to the interpretation of the *Portal* narrative as an adventure story embedded with an underlying depiction of love.

#### *IV.1 Life and Death Drives*

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<sup>9</sup> Freud never asserts that one sublimates the death drive, as he keeps his discussion of sublimation of the libidinal drives. I use a combination of his discussion of the death drive, sublimation, and Lacan's work on the sublimation of the libidinal aim to assert a sublimation of the death drive as that which averts death by repetitious proximity to it.

To better situate my themes, I provide a brief explanation of the drives and the terms as it originates in Sigmund Freud's analysis. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud presents a harrowing view of technology and scientific progress, a counter to the libidinal and death drives. He corrects his previous theory of the difference between the ego-libidinal and object-libidinal drives and asserts the existence of two inter-related drives, Eros (libidinal) and Thanatos (death). Providing the example of the germ cell, Freud theorizes that the Eros and Thanatos drive work together; while certain cellular parts die, other parts are given life (Freud, 1929/2010). Initially articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he (1920/1989) emphasizes that the death drive supersedes his previous theories on the drives. His earlier work informs his theorization of the death drive because it contributes to his discussion of sublimation and narcissism. According to Freud, during the early stages of development, two instincts take over the child, blurring the lines between sexual energy and self-preservation, or libido and ego-instinct. There is a differentiation between sexual energy and ego-instincts based on the differences between love and hunger. The difference is that the object becomes libidinal only "through the act of cathexing an object," (Freud, 1914/1989, p. 548). In regards to ego ideal, the subject forms this ideal of oneself as a way to regain her primary narcissism (Freud, 1914/1989). In other words, for the infant the mother's breast is both an object for self-preservation and a sexualized object or object-cathexis. For this reason, Freud explains that the ego creates a defense against these urges and seeks a solution from repressing them in the id.

In order to further combat the repression, the ego turns the object-cathexis into a narcissistic object, or an object with which the subject identifies. The process of establishing an ego ideal means that the subject internalizes the rules of the social world and forms it as part of this identity (Freud, 1923/1960). Through the process of sublimation, however, one negates the

sexual instinct by attributing another ideal. In his essay, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Freud defines sublimation as “a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality,” (Freud, 1914/1989, p. 558). A conscience develops due to societal surveillance, and the subject, desiring the feeling of being watched, internalizes the social norms arising from social interactions or comments made when she is engaging with her environment. By sublimation, the ego exercises a critical agency to limit the unconscious part of the ego. Freud (1914/1989) attributes the role of the conscience as having that agency that requires sublimation of narcissistic ego-instinct to better judge and to observe the ego.

In his *Ethics* seminar, Lacan alludes to the Freudian notion of drive as an energy or force in relation to the attaining a goal of desire as it appears to the subject in the form of a phantasy. Yet, he warns that it should not be reduced to instinct or conceptualized separate from jouissance or the phantasy (Lacan, 1986/1992). Lacan (1986/1992) designates a subject's meandering through life to satisfy oneself as “a particular destiny” (p. 319). This destiny entails a return to objects as they satiate needs or demands, which Lacan terms as the historicized aspect of the drive, one that incorporates a particular direction toward the drive highly dependent on a person's memory of the desired object of previous pursuit of the object in order to qualify as attaining satisfaction of it (Lacan, 1986/1992). In other words, any one person's satisfaction of the drive could have different desired objects that depend on a subject's individualistic history of desiring different objects. If the goal of desire to propel the desiring process, the subject finds temporary jouissance through the satisfaction of the drive. In *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupancic (2000) clarifies that desire is maintained by proliferating desire, while the drive is

satisfied by seeking its aim in different places. The drive is satisfied through the process of encountering and aiming for that object. Indeed for desire, the object of desire manifests itself through a phantasy for the subject, but the object itself does not encapsulate desire (Zupancic, 2000). Yet, in Lacanian thought, the libidinal drive includes sublimation as part of its original aim, an idea that I explicate later in my discussion. The discussion of the death drive helps explain how the death drive is continuously sublimated, or prolonging the drive to its goal.

My two themes of averted death, or sublimation of death as incorporating a repetition of an increasing confrontation with it, and the sadist homoerotic relationship between GLaDOS and Chell are both related. To reiterate once more, I use Freud and Lacan's work on the death drive and sublimation to create a term, sublimation of death, as the repetition of instances of averted death. Sometimes I refer to sublimation of the death drive and repetition of averted death and use them interchangeably. Since sublimation and the death drive as theoretical components and as examples in the game are referred in my explanation of both themes, I show the interrelation between both themes. When I discuss the theme of averted death, I also touch upon game mechanics and the ways that the repetitious elements in gameplay mirror the plot structure of having to solve similar puzzles in various test chambers. In this manner, the parallel of repetition of an averted death promises satisfaction to the player, yet it is only a guise. As I will explain, the notion of games in psychoanalytic context is to gain self-mastery over negative feelings, but as further explained by Lacan, the repetition of negative feelings brought by the games also gives player more discomfort. Thus, the repetition of averting death reminds players that the puzzles only become more difficult after each challenge is finished.

#### *IV.II Theme I: Sublimation as Repetition or Averted Death*

The theme of averted death in the games arises both in terms of how close Chell comes to dying and in GLaDOS' intentions for her. According to Freud, the death drive could mean the willingness to repeat or a compulsion for destruction, but I focus more on the first meaning. The first meaning of the death drive, the willingness to repeat, is relevant in terms of the gameplay and building skills to avert death in later puzzles. In the *Portal* series, the puzzles build on each other; the player solves simple puzzles at the beginning of the game and progresses to more complicated versions of these puzzles. As a result, this theme alludes to the plot structure in that a simple plot becomes repeated. While character development is inherent due to GLaDOS' impending comments after puzzle completion, this theme is much more focused on having players enact the plot. It is important to note that the theme of averted death incorporates the simple plot of entering into chamber room and solving puzzles and awaiting GLaDOS' comments. The theoretical concept of the death drive alludes to games, not only the *Portal* games but also more personal games as articulated in Freud's nephew's game.

Sigmund Freud defines the death drive as a compulsion for repetition, a return to the primal pleasurable state and inertia, and a compulsion for aggression (Freud, 1920/1989, 1929/2010). For my analysis, two implications factor heavily into my discussion of video games. The compulsion to repeat is a reoccurring theme within gameplay as well as Freud's famous observation of his nephew's Fort/Da game. The game consisted of a return and disappearance of a toy by pulling it with a string and casting it over the edge of a piece of furniture. After making the toy disappear and crying "Fort! (gone)," the boy reassured its reappearance and cried "Da! (there)." Freud analyzes this playful display as mastery of unpleasant feelings, such as the disappearance and reappearance of his mother. If the boy was aware of his mother's return and other happy feelings, he could manage his temporary sadness.

Even in instances where there is no reappearance of the object, the child attained mastery over painful experiences, a reversal of the passive position that he experienced in the temporary loss of his mother (Freud, 1920/1989). Thus, the pleasure principle is contradictory in nature, since the need for mastery entails a confrontation with displeasure. Moreover, repetition is inevitable in that part of repression entails holding satisfaction at bay (Freud, 1920/1989). Similar to the notion of games, Freud mentions that part of any cure in psychoanalysis is to relive the painful experiences to build a resistance to them. Since painful memories are repressed, the patient must work harder to remember something she does not desire. Pertinent to the display of watching oneself die in video games, the notion of reliving repressed memories or painful experiences is relevant. The repetition of failure in challenges is necessary in order to build skill to surpass certain levels, yet it also gives partial control of the plot development to the player.

Underlying the mastery of unpleasant feelings is the repetition of its experience in order for the return of a happy experience. If I take Freud's death drive to imply propulsion towards death itself, there is an inherent contradiction since most people seek to restore their own lives. This contradiction serves as a useful tool in theorizing the nature of the inhibited aim in sublimation. I interpret that when a subject sublimates her desire for death, she is deterring from this impulse, causing a turning away from fulfilling this desire. Since the goal of living requires one to turn away from the death drive, sublimation, then, is normalized and inevitable, shedding light on the idea that sublimation explains for a subject's motivation to achieve higher goals in life. Yet, another important notion concerning the repetition and sublimation is the reoccurring higher order achievements intended to inhibit one's death drive. If I interpret the death drive solely as a compulsion to repeat—Freud mentions that art, science, and religion temporarily serve as results of inhibited aims—I also perceive a repetitious act of sublimating the libidinal

drive aligns with the death drive. In other words, this contradiction in the meanings of the death drive, such as diverting against propulsion towards death and upholding a compulsion to repeat, shows show an interconnection to the libidinal drive, Eros. Repetition of the sublimated death drive, or instances of averted death, shows a reoccurring affirmation of the libidinal drive, yet only through the willingness to experience closer approximations towards death<sup>10</sup>.

Both Freud and Deleuze mention the interconnection of the drives, albeit differently from my recent articulation. Thus, Eros and Thanatos drives appear within grasp of one another, an idea that prompted Freud to assert “that the two kinds of instincts seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation, but always mingle with each other in different, very varying proportions, and so make themselves unrecognizable to us,” (Freud, 1929/2010, p. 98). Gilles Deleuze makes a similar assessment in his book, *Difference and Repetition*. In regards to repetition and the relationship between Eros and Thanatos, Deleuze asserts that Thanatos (the death drive) gives Eros the ability to repeat. In other words, Thanatos is a transformative principle that allows Eros, the libidinal energy, to repeat actions based on the primary repression, or the earlier series of ideational representations (Deleuze 1968/1994; Freud 1915/1989). Thus, interconnection of both drives complicates the function of repetition, since Thanatos gives Eros the ability to transform its directions towards different desired objects. Even though this combination distorts the subject’s awareness about her motivations for desired objects, I interpret the interconnection of death with libidinal drives relates propulsion towards death towards objects of desire. Yet, this is an articulation that extends Freud’s concept of the interconnection of death and libidinal drives. Even if perceiving the death drive as a willingness to repeat, the subject will repeat

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term sublimated death drive in different analyses in this chapter. I look at the way that Freud and Lacan examine the death drive and sublimation to assert a repetitious averted death that eventually refers to a will for life. Throughout this chapter, I look at the different meanings of the death drive in Freud’s work and look at how each meaning relates to my articulation of his ideas. Yet, my goal here is to clarify between Freud’s term and my use of them.

certain actions under the motivation of the libidinal drive, making self-mastery seem like an unattainable task.

The goal for self-mastery involves a sadomasochist inclination of the death drive to repeat repressed material to gain self-mastery. If self-mastery of a repressive memory is part of the curing process, it makes sense that repetition has a paradoxical nature, one that Deleuze refers to as “a cure” and “‘demonic’ power” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 19). It is also narcissistic in that the repetition involves mastery within oneself, an act of self-preservation against one’s own perception of the external stimuli (Freud, 1920/1989). Similar to the notion of games, Freud mentions that part of any cure in psychoanalysis is to relive the painful experiences to build a resistance to them. Since painful memories are repressed, the patient must work harder to remember something she does not desire. Pertinent to the display of watching oneself die in video games, the notion of reliving repressed memories or painful experiences is relevant. The repetition of failure in challenges is necessary in order to build skill to surpass certain levels. Thus, the sensation of failure occurs in the repetition of resolving similar puzzles, especially when later versions of puzzles add more complicated steps to the previous puzzles.

Similar to Freud’s analysis of repetition as a solution to procure self-mastery, in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan (1986/1992) mentions that repetition must be part of the process of the unraveling of the pleasure principle, a repetition of a traumatic act or dream is really an engagement between the thought and the real. He partially agrees with Freud’s notion of the death drive in that it is based on the subject’s perceptual conscious level, yet the repetitious drive is also historically founded on a signifying chain, interweaving fragments of different objects significant to the subject. In other words, the ways that the drive affects a certain individual’s repression based on its association with his or her subjective

relationship to different images and words. Lacan refers to this association of images and words as having a structure similar to language construction. By questioning the function of the game or ludic in providing self-mastery, Lacan indicates that the game further eludes the subject from self-mastery (Lacan, 1986/1992). The game consists of signifiers that lead to another signification chain, thus widening the gap between the subject and the repressed issue. Rather, the real or the actual issue of repression arises in the realization that something is amiss through a noise or a gesture or a lack of something in the original memory (Lacan, 1986/1992). Similar to the notion of the game as part of a cruel prolonged tool for a painful experience, a player's experience of dying or failing at a task in a game repeats the sensation of previous attempts at resolving a task in other games. Yet, the *Portal* games are unique in that the puzzles are situated in levels, ranging from easy to more difficult, and a player learns each type of tasks after successfully "mastering" the previous one. It is curious, however, that these different types of tasks reoccur in a much harder puzzle, thus showing that the previous tasks become nearly impossible to solve if a player compares solving them in their prior contexts. When a player perceives the new task in a more challenging context, she encounters new obstacles that hinder the player from solving it exactly the same way as she did in the previous context. The delusion of self-mastery then becomes similar to the psychoanalytic discussion.

In terms of gameplay mechanics, the willingness to repeat occurs in chambers involving similar puzzle resolution, thus enabling the players to learn and apply different techniques with the portal gun. Yet, the repetition simply alludes to a guise. In *Portal 1*, one example of repetition for self-mastery is in *Portal*'s momentum chambers: 10, 12, and the last portion of chamber 18. Chamber 10 occurs prior to the attainment of the orange portal gun. When the player initially enters the room, she notices the orange portal on a protruding wall above the

platform from where the player/Chell is standing. Further in the puzzle, a player notices two boxes depicting a small unisex figure dropping into one portal and an arrow coming out from the portal above the unisex figure. This small illustration indicates that the player must shoot a portal on a lowered floor. If the player/Chell chooses to look upward, she notices an orange portal placed on the protruding wall. By chamber 12, the player already has the orange portal gun, and she already knows the precise location to place the orange portal after having played the 10<sup>th</sup> testing chamber. Both the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> chambers have multiple levels to the puzzles, thus necessitating the need for visual cues to guide players to the sequential order to puzzle completion. By Chamber 18, however, the player must remember the free-falling technique from chambers 10 and 12; there is a lapse between Chambers 12 and 18, making the player “forget” about the previously learned skills, a feeling a disorientation when presented with similar looking puzzles in less challenging versions. One could say that the player represses the fear of death each time she successfully solves the puzzles in its multiple iterations, causing her to simultaneously feel successful yet doubtful each time they encounter previously unforeseen obstacles to similar types of puzzles.

In this simple plot structure, the theme of averted death by not falling too harshly on the tiles strengthens the plot of using the momentum to propel oneself further. This example functions to depict other examples of repetitious chambers or chambers that require previously learned skills simply to avoid a chance to die in a drastic way. The momentum strategy becomes very important in the 18<sup>th</sup> chamber when Chell has to portal while in midair in order to land into the strategically placed platform. If she falls onto an undesired area, she will die in a pool of poisonous goo. Thus, the player learns that skills are acquired in the earlier test chambers where the puzzles were easier and chances of death were slim. Yet, the guise of self-mastery takes over

once the player realizes that these skills are to be used in slightly harder contexts when death becomes approximately closer.

Repetition in *Portal 2* follows the same structure as the first game in the series. Chamber 11 introduces the player to the hard light bridge—a light blue bridge that allows the player to walk over unprotected areas of poisonous goo when using the portal device. However, Chambers 15 and 18 present more complicated puzzles, since resolving the task involves the process of using the hard light bridge to block the player from the turrets. While one of the major goals is to get a weighted storage cube from a group of turrets protecting it, one inadvertently learns to use the hard light bridge to block oneself from the turrets. This skill becomes valuable in a later chamber, Chamber 18, where it becomes difficult to kill a turret protected behind a barred cage. After acquiring a redirection cube to direct the thermal discouragement beam to kill the turret, one can direct the light to align with the receptacle beams, yet one gains the satisfaction of killing a turret in another way. This echoes the initial discovery in Chamber 16, where one cannot simply portal a way to the turrets without getting killed in the process. In Chamber 16, there is no companion cube to block oneself from the turrets, nor is there a hard light bridge. Before the main chamber, however, there is a laser beam that hits a white wall blocked by a mesh screen. Yet, one can use the portal gun to create portals—one with the laser beam and the other in front of the turrets—to aim the laser beam to kill the turrets. Thus, by means of repetition, the player gains two skills—a means of protection from turrets and a new way to kill a turret—after completing Chamber 18.

Players experience euphoria after successful puzzle completion, but within the plot of the games, the puzzle resolution is one more opportunity to live, causing death to be further subverted. As I previously stated, the repetition of chances to die defines the sublimation of the

death drive in that each repetitious approximation to death proves a sublimated death. For instance, when the player successfully achieves a challenging version of a simpler puzzle, she evades death each time she resolves this type of puzzle. Yet, the player also encounters the possibility that the next iteration of the puzzle will be too taxing, thus giving the player the temptation towards a desire for death or a desire to fail at the puzzle to eradicate frustrating feelings. Each chamber presents an opportunity for more difficult puzzles and more delusional thoughts of self-mastery, tempting the player to stop playing if it were not for the seductive curiosity of the end result. So far, I have shown how the death drive is a concept explaining repetition. After analyzing certain scenes in the game, however, I do perceive that sublimation of the death drive, or averted death, is a substantial theme in the game series.

### *Sublimation as the Desired Aim*

Another analysis of repetition responds to a sublimated death drive as a normal desired aim, an idea derived from Freud's other meaning of the death drive and a Lacanian view of sublimation as the natural aim of a drive. If one understands the Freudian notion of the death drive as a drive for inertia, then the idea is that one desires to lie still or dormant. The only time one lies in an inert state is death, thus I use Freud's concept to assert that the death drive is a partial desire for death, given the paradox that people assert a desire for other objects evident in the living experience. As I previously explained, the Freudian notion of sublimation refers more to an aversion of pleasurable feelings for a more noble activity or motivation. Yet, when taking into consideration the discussion of the repetition of the death drive, sublimation is integral to the process of averting the notion of death, if one considers that death is the true desired outcome<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am interlinking Freud's notion of the death drive as a state of inertia and sublimation. In this section, I combine Freud's notion of the death drive as repetition to his definition of the death drive as a state of inertia.

While this part of the averted death theme still comments on plot development, the use of sublimation is perceived in certain objects in addition to adding more meaning to the previously mentioned examples in the repetition of the death drive. Also, it adds more meaning to character development as seen through GLaDOS' comments towards Chell, especially her comments about prolonging her life simply to test further.

A sublimated death drive, therefore, explains the notion of escaping death for life. In my articulation, I pose that this trace of life endures throughout the process of enduring many instances of closer approximations towards death. Taking a Lacanian approach to sublimation, Joan Copjec (2004) defines sublimation as that which inhibits the drive's aim. The will is to not get the aim. Copjec (2004) writes, "Contrary to the vulgar understanding of it, then, sublimation is not something that happens to the drive under special circumstances, it is the proper destiny of the drive," (p. 30). If the death drive is to be in the state of inertia—an idea that Freud states most people desire—and the natural living experience requires that one acts according to prolong one's own life, then sublimation is naturally that which one wholeheartedly does if one seeks to divert from one's desires. In other words, by taking Lacan's notion of sublimation and Freud's notion of the death drive, I clarify that even if one desires death—the state of inertia—one still sublimates that desire because diversion of the drive is a natural process.

To clarify, the drives are partial drives that are based on the good feelings in primordial dual mother-child experience. Yet, the representations always differ from the actual thing-in-itself, *Das Ding*<sup>12</sup>. Since the subject can only find objects representing *Das Ding*, the goal is not

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<sup>12</sup> This concept touches upon the process in sublimation in which the subject aggrandizes an object to the level of The Thing—a "beyond of the sacred" element (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 140), possibly alluding to a sublime essence to which one attributes powers of a deity. Human beings have desired for objects based on its associations from The Thing, but they do not have access to the Thing-in-itself. The Thing is also exemplified in the use of a vase, as an ancient artifact with cultural relevance in Western history. The vase functions as a signifier for The Thing because it is a simultaneous void and container for other objects. It is a symbol for a signifier that signifies with an indefinite signified, or the vase can hold numerous objects and have different social, religious, and moral meanings. Also the vase takes on a different function that

to recover the lost object but to understand that the loss indicates a loss in one's own being. Sublimation factors into the drive in that it explains the changing notion of the object itself. The fact that the drive extends beyond an object, rather to an aim, explains for the notion that the subject seeks more objects as if creating a collection. Copjec (2004) refers to Lacan's parable of Prevert and his match-box collection, thus explaining that Prevert's collection went beyond the match-box itself and centered on the feeling arising from collecting them. In other words, the desired object is split—a subject feels partial satisfaction by attaining the object—and, the subject also senses the drive's extension beyond this object. This idea pertains little to the difference between the desired object and the satisfaction beyond it. Rather, Copjec clarifies that the object itself changes and splits. Sublimation shifts the subject's *jouissance* from the object itself and displaces the satisfaction. Copjec states,

There could not be a better description of drive/sublimation: *it so wills what occurs that the object it finds is indistinguishable from the one it chooses*. Construction and discovery, thinking and being, as well as drive and object are soldered together. The drive's creation, *ex nihilo*, of an object, a thing in the very place where unified *jouissance*, *das ding*, is absent, is evoked in this description but without calling up along with it the Romantic image of the artist-creator (p. 39).

Sublimation factors into the drive in that it explains for the changing notion of the object itself. The fact that the drive extends beyond an object, rather to an aim, explains for the notion that the subject seeks more objects as if creating a collection. Moreover, the drive to collect more objects refers to the different cake images on GLaDOS' monitor at the concluding boss fight, a term denoting the final antagonist/protagonist fight, in *Portal*. The repetition of the cake

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relates to sublimation. Lacan is asserting that sublimation—in the form of art or courtly poetry—diverts libidinal energy to create a new object, superimposing the form of desire itself (Lacan, 1986/1992).

images exemplifies a collection of different types of cakes, never the cake as The Thing-in-itself. It opens the possibility that the cake as The Thing-in-Itself is not an actual cake at all.

For better context of this idea, I explain the boss fight at the concluding portion of *Portal* where Chell fights GLaDOS in her chamber decorated with a handful of computers showing images of cake and other seemingly non-related images. The flash of images on her computer screen in her room at the conclusion of *Portal* demonstrates other links on this signification chain. Yet, if a player replays the game or finds an online walkthrough, she can better examine that the flash of images function as a collection of symbolic meaning to the significance of “the cake.” Depending on when one chooses to focus on the images, the sequential order of images varies. To name a few examples, some images include different cakes—one has inscribed “Happy Thanksgiving” and another, “October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1982”—different animals, old forms of machinery, a piece of chocolate cake with pliers either above or alongside it, park benches, and an open computer circuit. While some players ascribe little or no meaning to these images, other players might perceive associated meanings between the idea of cake, a sweet desert item, and forms of technology. In addition to functioning as a collection of symbolic items, the cake-in-itself is not necessarily an item that GLaDOS intends to offer. Rather, it is an object situated in a web of technological devices that she offers Chell/the player. Her promise of cake—considered a lie by most players—actually functions as a paradoxical statement that states that the promise of a cake is the association of sweet dessert given in the midst of puzzle solving within a scientific center. Thus, there are two ways to interpret the signs on the screen. The first meaning is that the cake signifies a connection to technology; the cake is not a traditional notion of the cake, and the cake as parts of technology was already offered to Chell through her exposure to different parts of the puzzles. Or, the second meaning is that the cake is an object

that GLaDOS will forever use to taunt Chell, and it is technology that she offers instead. The will to sublimate the libidinal drives, or the will to eat to further life, brings her closer to death, yet it is also death that Chell also sublimates and nearly avoids. But by engaging in the sublimation of libidinal drives, Chell opts for death, which negates the offer. Yet, in *Portal 2*, Chell also sublimates the death drive when GLaDOS suggests that she will reanimate the dead once Chell dies. Thus, even in death, GLaDOS does not seek an end to their relationship. She wishes for the continuation of the sublimation of death. During the boss fight, Chell defeats GLaDOS by dropping her personality cores into the incinerator. The more successful the player becomes, the crueler GLaDOS' comments become. She initially "confesses" that Chell broke her heart, yet she increasingly tears at Chell's humanity by mimicking her death with the neurotoxin and telling her that she avoided her cake party where none of her friends were invited because she does not have them.

If one perceives the libidinal drive as a life force and reinforcement of narcissism—as seen in the interconnection of libidinal drives and the association of feeding—it is possible to perceive the cake as a promise for life. Yet the scene at the end of chamber 19—the icon of the cake and shortly after, the scene of the open fire—and the constant promise of cake throughout the game interconnects the notion of life and death. The subversion of the drive for cake, or libidinal aim, is one aim for the game series. Yet, the player/Chell also subverts the death drive to achieve the same satisfaction. Thus, when GLaDOS repetitiously promises cake in the guise of death, she is asserting one of her many paradoxes. If Chell escapes death, she will have her life yet no cake. If Chell follows GLaDOS' directions for the promise of cake and therefore dies, she still has no cake. This relationship harkens back to Lacan's famous statement of the ultimatum between "your money or your life," in which the choice of life marks a deprived life

without money (Lacan, 1973/1998, p. 212). The only difference is that the cake functions as a guise of death and an affirmation of life. The ambiguity in meaning appropriates the idea that the death drive as a compulsion to repeat is the life force of the game.

Sublimation of the death drive as the actual aim for satisfaction explains the player's feelings of elation after each puzzle. From a gameplay perspective, the goal of the game, aside from puzzle resolution, is to avoid death, thus to subvert it. Yet, the theme of sublimation or averted death also functions in the narrative in terms of how the player helps Chell avoid death through puzzle resolution. In both games, the player/Chell avoids turrets, acidic floors, and confrontations with pellets and open fire. Even the momentum travel involves a risky approximation towards death. In *Portal*, the player/Chell has to evade the open fire in the last chamber 19. The open fire—juxtaposed with the previous image of cake on the wall—is perceived as initially inevitable. The player is on a moving platform headed toward the fire, and a white wall above the fire pit becomes noticeable at a certain time, seconds prior to the impending death. Thus, anticipation arises quickly as the player shoots a portal above the fire pit and to the sidewall, thus evading the ultimate death.

If the notion of self-mastery is a guise in which the game is a structure within a signification chain, then I argue that the player directly experiences GLaDOS' empty promise of cake and reward. In one sense, the puzzles become more difficult as one proceeds through the game, making the sense of self-mastery appear as if it is all within GLaDOS' domain. Any successful completion of a test chamber is as empty as her promise for cake; for the player, the more one explores in the game, the further she feels helpless. It is pertinent to mention the joy of finding both Rattman's dens in Chamber 17 in both *Portal* games fulfills a gamer's sense of achievement, while simultaneously providing a sense of doom when seeing "The cake is a lie."

GLaDOS' repetitive assertions of her last fabrication affirm the notion of the game as a signification chain outside of the player's control. Furthermore, her paradoxical statement on portal devices and forward momentum signifies the double entendre of a player's sense of control in mental exertion yet simultaneous confusion: "You appear to understand how a portal device affects forward momentum or to be more precise, how it does not." Initially, one denies this statement, since the portal device enables one to strategically place portals to allow one to free-fall to one's destination. Yet, the statement could also be true in the sense that the portal device does not directly affect momentum; by giving the portal device agency in the sentence, it hides the fact that gravity provides effective free-falling, not the portal device itself. Yet, GLaDOS' paradoxical statements demonstrate that she holds the answers to the signification chain formulated by her speech and images in the Science Center.

In *Portal 2*, other examples of sublimation resurface in GLaDOS' comments to Chell after Wheatley reawakens her. More vividly in the second installment of the series the character development, as seen in the dialogue, evinces the theme of averted death. While GLaDOS' comments are part of the plot development, her words help interpret her character development, especially in relation to both Chell and Wheatley. In Chapter 2, the player/Chell confronts GLaDOS' subdued wrath towards the fact that she had continuously relived her own death due to a quick-save feature item in her operating system. GLaDOS chooses to place Chell in Chamber 19, the last chamber where she attempted to burn Chell in an open fire after promising her cake and Chell diverted her death. While GLaDOS makes no mention of the irony, the player notes the sadistic humor in confronting one's former enemy in the same room where she sought one's life. The humor is further enacted in GLaDOS' comments on Chell's next 60 years of test-solving; yet, Chell cannot escape her fate even after her death as GLaDOS playfully warns her

that her new hobby after Chell's death would be to "reanimate the dead." Her comments refer to sublimation of the death drive, since death is not a fate she desires for Chell. Rather, GLaDOS desires the experience of perceiving Chell's cunning escape from death, causing euphoric sensations to arise within her. Sublimation in this example clarifies any misconception the player has concerning GLaDOS' intention to kill her in *Portal*: the escape from tricky contraption both in the test chambers and in the underground passages was intentional.

Even though the player experiences suspense in confronting GLaDOS after her reawakening, her comments with undertones of sublimation cause reassurance that death is not the goal. Furthermore, GLaDOS' statements are a projection of her own existence as a sentient being who cannot die. Moreover, death is always around the corner, lurking around like a surprise. There are remnants of life in the Center, such as the office spaces with no peoples, coffee cups, notes, chairs, paper, and observation decks. All these spaces and objects refer to a prior human existence, even though the human scientists are long dead. It pertains to a living death, since Chell is living and observes the remnants but the remnants themselves are references of death. With so many details of averted death, one perceives that the plot development is guided by this theme, since the puzzle resolution is dependent on the player's ability for life preservation. In terms of the details in the narrative that deepen the plot development, the *Portal* series uses symbols to refer to the theme itself while also building on another theme.

Through the process of articulating a new notion of sublimation of the death drive, I explicate the theme of averted death and show the way that interactions between characters, plot, and use of symbols are enveloped in this theme. Through the embodiment of Chell, players enact her puzzle-solving skills, which initiates GLaDOS' sardonic comments. As I previously mentioned, the signification process in GLaDOS', which also relates to the guise of self-mastery

in trying to decipher GLaDOS' comments, also suggests some of GLaDOS' traits. She appears willing to give information that simultaneously conceals the context of her words. The theme of averted death explains for the adventure plot of having to solve puzzles to save one's life and to escape the antagonist. My interpretation of this theme clarifies the plot development more than the other narrative elements, yet, the resolution of puzzles also provides satisfaction for the players, who suspect a mystery to the setting and GLaDOS' motives. While players may have to experience stress when attempting to solve the puzzles, they do experience the clues to uncover motives behind GLaDOS' strange behavior as seen in her comments that appear helpful yet convey contradictory meanings and in the images on her computer screen during her confrontation with Chell. Moreover, the aversion of death helps motivate the player keep solving puzzles, thus moving the plot further. In the second game, the plot through puzzle resolution becomes more apparent as each time a puzzle is solved, more of the plot unfolds through the history of the setting and the interaction with the two characters. The plot seems minimal, since the story progresses with dialogue from the characters or Cave Johnson's monologue. Yet, it proves that the thematic development structures the way that players navigate the setting and gives them internal motivation to solve the puzzles. Since this theme incorporates the game mechanics, the player feels as if she is rendering the plot or exercising procedural agency. Unlike the next theme, the sadist homoerotic relationship between GLaDOS and Chell, the averted death theme comments more on gameplay and narrative. By analyzing GLaDOS' relationship with Chell, I take on a more nuanced perspective on character development. While averted death unraveled the manner by which players engaged with the plot, the sadist relationship uncovers GLaDOS and her transformation.

#### *IV.III Theme II: Sadist homoerotic relationship between Chell and GLaDOS*

My explication of sublimation of the death drive, or a repetitious aversion to death, is important in discussing the sadistic relationship—not only is averted death an underlying part of the plot development, use of symbols, and character development—but it also explains the foundation of GLaDOS' torturing of Chell. Through her taunts, she wishes to disturb Chell's concentration in puzzle resolution as a form of torture but also to increase the approximation towards death. When looking at the importance of sublimation in the relationship between GLaDOS and Chell, one perceives that the relationship starts out as sadistic but transforms into another type of relationship that is not necessarily masochistic, yet one that maintains a liminal status of both. As one uncovers the psychoanalytic analysis in her motives in her words and actions, one perceives the idea of sublimation of the death drive and libidinal drives and finds correlations to Gilles Deleuze's models of sadism and masochism, yet one that is associated with the latter.

In Gilles Deleuze's essay, *Coldness and Cruelty*, he (1967/1991) explains the psychic articulation of sadistic and masochistic relationships. To briefly discuss the important points, he frames sadism as a transgression of social law, the paternal dominance over the familial organization, which might be perceived as the male dominance over the traditional female labor. For this reason, sadist bonds typically manifest themselves in literary plot developments between a father exerting dominance over the daughter and eradicating the mother's role in the familial group. The overturning of the social law and social norms originates from a transgression of Kantian moral imperatives, a point further elaborated and pontificated by Deleuze and Lacan.

In pre-Kantian terms, the moral law becomes an expression of enacting the Good, or God's laws onto humanity, yet, in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant posits that moral

law is supreme in-itself (Deleuze, 1967/1991), since it requires that humans act in accordance with the higher Good which may or may not comply with one's happiness on a subjective level (Kant, 1788/1956, p. 129). The moral law has its own authority and makes its object indeterminate, thus the moral law itself is a function of the Good, the collective possibility of human beings' happiness contingent on faith in God's involvement to procure human worthiness of such happiness (Kant, 1788/1956, p. 134-135). By articulating that the law is a principle of higher authority, the object, or the purpose of which people follow stringent moral laws, becomes unknowable to the subject (Deleuze, 1991). In other words, happiness and freedom entails following the law if one upholds the belief that the Higher Good is God's will (Kant, 1788/1956, p. 134), but there is a difference between a person's happiness and happiness to enact God's Goodness. Conducting his own analysis of Kant's moral imperative in his essay, "Kant with Sade", Jacques Lacan (1962/2006) initially describes Kant's maxims as articulating a universal guide for moral behavior and postulates that Kant conceptualizes the Good as excluding the pathological feelings or feelings of pleasure that arise from human interactions with an object. Thus, given a choice between life and honor, in which the decision of life involves giving false testimony over someone, a person has the freedom to make a morally correct decision. Despite its terrible consequences, one is still free to make a decision, since Kant specifies that it is one's autonomy and freedom that makes one subject to moral law (Kant, 1788/1956, p. 90). Comparing Kantian ethics to Sadist pursuit of pleasure, Lacan takes this idea of autonomy and freedom with the imperative of morality and makes a correlation to Sade's notion of the way one's freedom is bound to seeking pleasure. Furthermore, the rejection of feelings of pleasure in order to take up a moral code of behavior in order to attain the Good, causing one to confront feelings of displeasure in the process. Furthermore, he terms being in

the world as encompassing an experience of self-torment, in which Lacan specifies that Kant uses the terms “the person never be used as a means except when he is at the same time an end,” (Kant, 1788/1956, 90; Lacan, 1962/2006). As Lacan previously indicated, Deleuze corroborates with his view that enactment of the law also underlies one’s repressed desires, creating a synonymous relationship between the object of the law and the object of desire (Deleuze, 1967/1991). Deleuze further mentions that subjects feel a sense of guilt when following the law, thus creating a relationship between guilt and obedience to the law.

In his seminar on *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1986/1992) also describes a few of Kant’s imperatives and compares them to Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Initially, he analyzes Kant’s imperatives to act according to what one would apply as a universal law. Lacan further analyzes that Kant makes a distinction between nature and society, thus assuming that social laws require a transgression of the nature laws by indicating that Lacan explains that Kant removes sentiment from following a code of ethics (1962/2006). Lacan analyzes Kant’s code of ethics as being outside of the consequences of one’s actions—one should always act morally regardless of the circumstances. As Eleanor Kaufman (2010) clarifies in her analysis of Deleuze’s hierarchical categories, Kant’s second treatise, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, makes the law so formal that it potentially overturns the first treatise (p. 82). Kant explains the primacy of pure practical reason in that it excludes that reason should include the interests of many over one’s pathological interests. Theoretical reason differs from practical reason in that it is limited to empirical experiments, as in the case where one has a certain belief that could be proven by the judgments of others in order to check for evidence disproving or proving her belief. He differentiates on sensations and laws and pontificates on the example of the Copernican discovery, a scientific law requiring reason and Newton’s laws of gravity. Yet, Kant

seems to overturn his own logic when speaking about the primacy of practical reason. His advice is to act according to what one wills to be a universal law (Kant, 1788/1956, p. 135-136). Lacan updates Kant's imperative as "Never act except in such a way that your action may be programmed," (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 77) and comments that by upholding this statement one removes oneself from acting by the Supreme Good and that one should not give up on her desire. In other words, Kant's words "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law," reinforces others to act according to their desires if they will it to become universal. As Lacan does in the essay, "Kant with Sade", he reverses the Kantian maxim in order to push for a universal social rule that humans can take pleasure with another person's body as one sees fit (Lacan, 1986/1992). Thus, the purity in Kant's treatise is overturned to explain for a Sadist form of pleasure in which one person inflicts pain upon another to elicit pleasure (Lacan, 1962/2006). Lacan mentions that Kant wants humans to act on laws of nature as opposed to laws of society.

Sade's response to Kant's moral imperative is that the law functions as a way to maintain the sovereign's power. The law ensures dominance from masters and slaves alike and appropriates tyranny. Deleuze slightly counters this view in that his analysis of Sadism involves a justification to overturn social laws that compel moral rigidity and to show a possibility that anarchy brings about freedom. Thus, the only way to subvert the law and tyranny is to instill revolutionary anarchy, which is the essential underlying principle nature of humanity. Thus, a subversion of tyranny involves an overturning of the law (Deleuze, 1967/1991). Freedom is only achieved through the transgression of the law, which is a part of social conformity. But to achieve freedom, it seems as if there has to be repetitious and increasing amounts of pain as the process continues. This corroborates with the view that Sadism implies a series of repetitious

and quantitatively increasing amounts of pain inflicting upon the victim. Moreover, the transcendence of the law, aligns itself with the view of the father within the symbolic realm, as seen as the paternal overturning of the familial structure (Deleuze, 1967/1991). Using these ideas in my analysis of Chell and GLaDOS' relationship, I qualify how Deleuze's models are relevant to my discussion, despite the fact that at times their relationship counters Deleuze's strict distinction between sadism and masochism.

In both games, *Portal: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*, the player perceives the different forms of manipulation that GLaDOS enacts on Chell as synonymous as repetitious forms of torture in a sadist relationship. In *Portal 1: Still Alive*, in Chamber 17, she manipulates Chell with the companion cube; death is nearly avoidable when the fireball hits her and when she has to stand on the super megawatt button. After the player solves that part of the puzzle, Chell looks at the different raised platforms and considers that there are more steps to the puzzle. But after going onto the platforms, Chell finds the exit and puts the companion cube onto the button. GLaDOS congratulates her, and then tells her that the cube cannot accompany Chell, thus prompting her to place it into the incinerator. When Chell places it there, she congratulates her for placing it into the incinerator quicker than any other test subject, intending to make Chell, and by extension, the player, feel horrible for getting rid of the companion cube. When Chell escapes the fire-pit, GLaDOS attempts to lure her back to her by telling her a series of statements intended to stir Chell's emotions. Examples include: "Someone cut the cake, I told them to wait for you." "Where are you going? You're not even going the right way, because I don't think you are going where you think you are going." "Remember when you were going to the fire pit and I said "goodbye", and you were like "no way," and then I was all, "we pretended we were going to

murder you.” “That was great.” “You’re not even a good person. Did you know that? Good people don’t end up here.”

Like the first part of the game series, GLaDOS resorts to deprecating remarks that are increasingly more insulting as Chell progresses through the chambers in *Portal 2*. For instance, she comments on Chell’s supposed weight gain yet praises her ability to solve puzzles effectively as if she were the predator and the puzzles were the prey. She fabricates a phone message recording indicating that the phone number belonged to Chell’s parents who left her and did not want her. GLaDOS also tries to provoke her fear by creating a loud sound to startle her. She also tells her that she saw a deer a day prior, but that perhaps if Chell continues to do well, GLaDOS will take her to the surface of the Aperture Center to see the deer itself. During Chapter 2, GLaDOS tends to insult Chell, for minor reasons such as solving a test too quickly and solving it too slowly in other instances. She blows up a companion cube, calls Chell garbage twice and apologizes again to insinuate that she intended to insult Chell in case she did not understand her meaning the first time she referred to her as garbage. These forms of manipulation in both games allude to the way that GLaDOS simultaneously thwarts Chell’s progress while also empowering her. The comments demonstrate her admiration for Chell’s puzzle solving abilities, but they also depict frustration in that Chell succeeds in moments GLaDOS does not anticipate. Her comments and treatment towards Chell, however, further infer an interpretation of her admiration as sublimated into vitriolic statements and a desire for Chell’s death. Rather than just having moral desires sublimated, the desire becomes expressed in darker ways, suggesting that desiring death for Chell extends beyond seeing her die; rather, her death could save her from a multitude of problems within the Science Center.

In his explanation of sublimation, Jacques Lacan uses courtly love—a form of conceptualizing poetic love by means of restraint and idealization of a feminine object—as an anecdote to explain the complexities of sublimation. The notion of love is based on restraint, or “techniques of holding back, of suspension,” (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 152). The object of desire is one who is separated and inaccessible to the lover. Rather, her characterization is dependent on the lover/poet’s idealization of her, thus alluding to the poet’s narcissistic ideal of her. Lacan (1986/1992) defines it as a paradox to the pleasure principle by which the rules of engagement entail a pursuit of desire through words and not engaging in sexual intercourse. Rather, the means of acquiescence and adoration act as vehicles for the proliferation of desire, yet the aim is to deny oneself sexual pleasure or to enact in “the pleasure of experiencing unpleasure,” (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 152) or a Sadist form of it. This brief explanation does capture the idea that another emotion is thwarted and expressed in words and gestures that hint at the need for sexual exploration, yet is left unattended. To situate it to the *Portal* narrative, it also explains for the way that GLaDOS’ comments function similar to the role of poetry in courtly love: both show admiration for the object of desire, yet thwart this desire by enacting the inherent sadistic sensation to not express desire towards the intended person. One difference is that GLaDOS’ comments reveal a darker intention due to the interconnection of the death drive and libidinal drives, causing a combination of different repetitious and resignifying purposes.

In regards to the relationship between the death and libidinal drives in *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze (1968/1994) refines his discussion on repetition and the connection between these drives from his analysis in *Coldness and Cruelty*. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze posits the first synthesis shows repetition based on pleasurable libidinal drives mandated by the Id and the narcissistic object-choice patterns that satisfy the subject (p. 108). The second

active synthesis involves displacing and disguising the virtual object from the subject. The active synthesis is drawn towards the reality principle, thus initially pulling the narcissistic ego into relation with real objects. Deleuze mentions that the narcissistic ego internalizes the differences between the virtual and real objects and finds itself fragmented in relation to the idea of the ego as Other. The active synthesis retraces its steps as repetition back to the narcissistic ego, and the result is that the ego finds itself lacking what it thought it had (p. 110). Since the subject finds herself lacking in the repetitious cycle of the active synthesis, she is pulled into the third synthesis in which Eros or the libidinal drive no longer has any power. After using Eros as the driving force in the past and active syntheses, the death instinct, or Thanatos, annihilates the subject. The narcissistic ego is stripped of its memory and selfhood and transforms into a static desexualized form. Because libidinal energy is sublimated in the formulation of the superego, the energy becomes desexualized, creating a fragment of selves leading to the annihilation of the subject and the superego. There are two deaths, one is the personal death and the other is a death against time and the constraints of present and past but concerned with consistent return (p. 112). The two deaths can also illustrate the notion of pure time, in which time exists without the constraints with subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> The third synthesis of time involves a resexualization of the pain involved in the annihilation of the subject—or a recharged desexualized drive (p. 114). In her analysis of Deleuze's different structures in his syntheses of time and models of sadism and masochism, Eleanor Kaufman (2010) aptly clarifies that Deleuze's third synthesis of time

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan's Seminar on Ethics of Psychoanalysis expands largely on the idea of two deaths. His analysis of Antigone, on which I elaborate further, depicts the idea of two deaths in which one finds oneself living yet alienated from signifiers that allude to life. As in the case with Antigone, she is living yet feels compelled to die because she has nothing holding her to persist her existence. It might be that Lacan's seminar on sublimation, an idea that explains for the prolonging of one's pursuit towards a desired object, demonstrates that through the act of sublimating one's desire by filling it with different objects of choice actually fulfills the living experience. The moment the signifiers of desire desist, or the person stops desiring different objects, the person has a different subjectivity, one that does not display different intellectual, artistic, or physical goals. So, even though this person might live, they are not engaging in the living experience.

incorporates the death instinct, a new notion of time, and a static notion of being: this notion of time coincides with the model of sadism due to the absolute negation (p. 81). The interconnection of the drives in a psychoanalytic sense describes the triumph of the death instinct in the sadist model.

Sadism appears to work on the side of death instincts, the destructive component of enabling pleasure through repetitious forms of painful inflictions upon a victim. The death instinct functions as the repetitious factor bound by Eros, the libidinal instincts (Deleuze, 1967/1991). Thanatos is silent and groundless, whereas Eros is described as an active energy (Deleuze, 1967/1991). In Sadism, the identification of the paternal function or the symbolic position of social norms occurs in the formation of the superego or ego ideal, a process in which the projection of the ego is cast upon an exterior object (Deleuze, 1967/1991). There is the option of sublimation, or the spiritual and moral enactment of the libidinal drives. Deleuze (1967/1991) gestures that another alternative to sublimation is the desexualization process, in which Eros is bound in the creation of the superego. Deleuze suggests that there are three effects from the desexualization process: sublimation, functional disturbances, and the resexualization process. The latter of these three effects is an alternative to the other two, and it embodies a sexualization of the desexualization process. Thus, for the Sadist, the formation of the superego becomes sexualized in the resexualization process (Deleuze, 1967/1991, p. 117). Thus the sadist identifies with the superego and unleashes pain onto the victim, the external object onto which the ego is projected (p. 118). The irony is that if the sadist identifies his own ego with the victim, then she also identifies with the victim, making her enjoy the pain she is inflicting (Deleuze, 1967/1991). Yet, Deleuze is careful to indicate that pain is an effect only, as Eros is desexualized when Thanatos reappears as resexualized energy (p. 120). The resexualization does

not eradicate the desexualization, but it functions on a new level, affirming Kaufman's analysis of Deleuze's third synthesis of time in which time and being are static and the death instinct prevails (Kaufman 2010, p. 81; Deleuze 1967/1991, p. 117). Sade describes that no drive or desire, whether ambition or greed, is apart from lust, rather, it reemerges as a desire with the motivations interconnected as to produce a new desire.

In regards to the *Portal* games, I posit that both resexualization and desexualization are represented through the nature of GLaDOS and Chell's relationship, even though Deleuze describes these processes as distinctive end results in his model of sadism and masochism, respectively. Initially, their relationship depicts a sadist model. To depict repetition in sadism, Deleuze (1991) briefly mentions Pierre Klossowski's analysis of the psychoanalytic study of the role in repetition in Sadism. He describes a transgression if experienced as a spiritual act that entails a reconstituted form of the carnal act (p. 119), thus a repetition in a different form.

Deleuze (1967/1991) explains the changed nature of repetition, repetition runs wild and becomes independent of all previous pleasure. It has itself become an idea of ideal. Pleasure is not a form of behavior related to repetition, accompanying and following repetition, which has itself become an awesome independent force. Pleasure and repetition have thus exchanged roles, as a consequence of the instantaneous leap, that is to say the twofold processes of desexualization and resexualization. In between the two processes the Death Instinct seems about to speak, but because of the nature of the leap, which is instantaneous, it is always the pleasure principle that prevails, (p. 120).

In other words, for Deleuze, Eros and Thanatos linked together binds energy and enabled repetition. For sadism, the desexualization incorporates a process of identification with the father-image, creating a superego or ego-ideal (Deleuze, 1967/1991). The ego-ideal identifies it within its victims, so GLaDOS perceives part of herself in Chell—a love of testing and an insatiable will--that almost follows a Kantian imperative to act. I interpret Deleuze's work in its application to Chell and GLaDOS' relationship that this will to sublimate death and the libidinal drives that makes the non-existent cake so significant.

Harkening to my previous discussion of the signification process as seen in the images on GLaDOS' computer screen, I perceive that the non-existent cake is actually a symbol of sublimation. Although it also functions as an example of manipulating the player into the guise of self-mastery, it could also function as an example of sublimated desire. It is not the cake that GLaDOS offers, rather she shows different images to signify the connection between technology and the cake. So while GLaDOS does not offer Chell cake, she offers her the highest technological device that she mentions has more worth than the collective income of people in Chell's hometown, as she herself states.

If one applies Deleuze's discussion of the patriarchal role in sadism, one could infer that GLaDOS took over Cave Johnson's role as the overseer of the facility. One could perceive it as GLaDOS taking over the father's role and usurping Cave's role and taking the symbolic daughter. Given the symbolic structure of a family and Chell's lack of family, one can see the potato as symbolically representing the connection of the familial structure. Cave Johnson originated the paternal role as perceived in his award for potato science in which the player acknowledges that it was the beginning of his scientific career that inevitably led him to create the Aperture Science Center. If one looks closely at the *Bring Your Daughter to Work Day*

science projects, one notices that Chell's project has the overgrown potato plant, one that supplies the potato that Wheatley—the new antagonist AI of the game—uses into which to transfer GLaDOS' mind. GLaDOS usurps the father's role and puts Chell in the role of the daughter and victim by challenging her to death and threatening her with experiences and/or the threat of death. Some of these threats occur in the form of insults and reminders of mortality.

Moreover, the potato also functions as a reincarnated form for GLaDOS, the only form with limited capacities that allows her to find her true identity as Caroline, Cave's trustworthy secretary and devotee to the Aperture Science Center. Furthermore, it also alludes to the idea that one's identity transcends corporeal, organic, and mechanical bodies. As a symbol of a sublimated death drive, the potato differs from the cake in that it functions as an embodiment of revelation. In GLaDOS' passive state, she is able to relive her own mechanical memory—as a human who confirms her boss' commands—when she repeats her own words as Caroline, “Yes, sir, Mr. Johnson.” It is her state of passivity that allows her to re-experience her devotion for him that she represses in lieu of her intellectual rigorous desire for scientific testing. While the cake was a function of a libidinal sublimation or pleasure through mechanical manipulation, the potato functions as a symbol of the intersection of the organic and inorganic life—Chell's overgrown plant and GLaDOS' new body and GLaDOS' existence as an AI and her human existence as Caroline. The significance of the potato also refers to the persistent oppositional relationship between Chell and GLaDOS in which each character consistently devises a trap for the other. It is an opposition that defines the two characters and creates more suspense when they must join forces to defeat Wheatley.

In their collaboration, one may perceive the interworking of Thanatos and Eros shifting from the desexualization process—arguably also inherent in the sublimation process—to the

resexualization and shifting between the two processes, an idea that I explore as I describe the nature of GLaDOS' relationship with Chell in the two games. One perceives this shift in GLaDOS' treatment of Chell when she loses power and seeks to return to her body. While I propose that the representation of this relationship evinces qualities of both models of sadism and masochism, I must carefully state that for Deleuze, these two models are distinct and never coincide in representation. Sublimation refers to Deleuze's model of masochism, yet I refer to sublimation as the diverted death drive, not necessarily an allusion to sublimation as an artistic device or tool for educating purposes, as in indicated in Deleuze's model (p. 32-33). Rather, a sublimated death drive alludes to the type of repetition, which involves the spiritual act that causes transgression. GLaDOS, symbolizing the superego, recognizes the ego, represented as Chell/the player, thus explaining reasons for her attachment to Chell/the player's brilliance in successful puzzle completion. While GLaDOS does explain that successful puzzle completion does emit a euphoric sensation within her, GLaDOS specifically targets Chell throughout the games. From a gameplay perspective, this makes sense since the player embodies Chell's persona to solve the puzzle, hence the main emphasis of the game is to render solutions from her perspective. Yet, the focus on Chell's duration of life intrigues players. At the end of *Portal: Still Alive*, GLaDOS takes Chell back to the facility for the purpose of testing, and she also chooses not to kill her but to keep her alive for the purpose of testing. Since GLaDOS is inherently interested in science, she gets pleasure from Chell's testing. Yet, it is a paradoxical situation in which GLaDOS identifies partly with her while still critiquing her humanity. Her former human identity, Caroline, reminds her of herself, thus demonstrating a narcissistic process inherent in the sublimation process of distinguishing the superego and the ego. Chell, known for her tenacity, reminds GLaDOS of her former human identity, especially in Caroline's

insistence on furthering science. Caroline was devoted to the Aperture Center as well as to Cave Johnson, who mistreated all his employees and test subjects in his own plans to further unethical science. His treatment of her, however, differed in that he spoke softer to her and praised her devotion to science, a devotion that coincides with Chell's tenacity in solving each puzzle. GLaDOS only lets her know when she loses power and remains passive in the body of a potato.

It is GLaDOS' passivity, explained in the Deleuzian notion of the automaton, which allows her to perceive herself. Taken from Deleuze's cinema theory, I use his explanation of the automaton—the presence of film techniques that animate the actions in early pre-War French films—to refer to the notion of passivity in relation to the inanimate or the robot. Using the example of a shadow chasing a human in the streets, Deleuze explains the presence of inanimate objects looming over the life of the human, showing an inversion of power of the inanimate over the mortal life yet the invigoration of life within the inanimate object (Deleuze, 1986). On the one hand, this explanation helps prove the triumph of the Death Instinct and end of subjectivity, in terms of GLaDOS' life after her human life ended. Yet the games challenge this part of Deleuze's ideas. As an automaton, GLaDOS is given another chance to perceive her behavior from another vantage point.

Similar to Deleuze's explanation of Michel Tournier's reworking of Robinson Crusoe through his novel, *Friday*, GLaDOS has her world shifted through her loss of power, which equates a loss of a particular structure that affected her perception of her world. In his short essay, "Michel Tournier and the World Without Others", Deleuze (1969/1990) explains that Robinson becomes dehumanized through his experience of being shipwrecked on the island, Esperanza. Through his loss of the Other, or "the structure of the perceptual field without which the entire field could not function as it does," (p. 307), Robinson deviates from his norms and

routines that he upheld in his typical world and became an element of the island. Deleuze further explains that a loss of Others implicates the loss of the expression of possibilities and numerous outcomes (p. 320), and perverse sexuality, like that of the sadist, shows a loss of a perceptual structure in which others maintain their typical roles and norms as desiring and desirable objects. In replacement of the Other, the sadist upholds another structure where the victims are displaced bodies (Deleuze, 1990, p. 320). When considering the relevance of this concept to my analysis of GLaDOS as a sadist, I use this idea to show that her passivity reflects her shift in her system, a loss of Others. No longer having access of unlimited power and voyeuristic view of Chell, GLaDOS' silent presence affirms her focus on Chell's puzzle resolution, causing players to note that her comments no longer interrupt their game playing. Yet, the nature of puzzle resolution and its accompanying security for GLaDOS' life shifts as well. No longer does GLaDOS feel the euphoric effects of Chell's puzzle resolution, rather, her focus on Chell's success shifts to a focus on life, showing that the structure in which GLaDOS uses to perceive Chell's success in puzzle resolution falls apart. As indicated in Deleuze's description of resexualization as a process in which "the desexualized has become in itself the object of sexualization" (p. 117), GLaDOS perceives Chell as the being who transcends death, thus offering GLaDOS the chance to also continue to divert from death itself by going closer to its proximity.

In the process of being passive, therefore, I perceive that GLaDOS learns about her past and possibly reflects on her previous treatment of Chell, both events that the player also learns as she navigates through the puzzles and Aperture Center. Yet, through the power shift, she also learns about her former life and her abilities to surpass death in the organic form. This recapture through memory, an idea further explained in the next chapter, only compares Chell and GLaDOS, since they both divert from death. The education aspect is critical in Deleuze's

masochism model, in which the victim learns to endure pain as an artform. In the process of disavowing sensuality (p. 31), the masochist learns through to await pleasure through painful suspension of sexual activity. Through the use of pretty objects that are fetishized through sensuous activity, the tortured learns to appeal to pain and equate it with sensuous activity, showing the relevance of art in the masochism model (Deleuze, 1967/1991). As a result, pleasurable pain is a trait that one acquires through the anticipation of pleasure, making masochism more creative than its sadist counterpart. In context to the *Portal* games, however, GLaDOS and Chell's relationship appears to reflect elements of the model of masochism due to the insistence of education and privileging of the desexualization process at this point. Yet, the shifting nature of the relationship does not change the nature of GLaDOS' previous threats, nor does it alter the player's perception that GLaDOS had always intended to release Chell and used her previous threats as artful acts of sustained pleasure, as it might be interpreted using a model of masochism. Rather, the shift in the relationship functions as an incident that changes the nature of their sadistic relationship, placing emphasis on the role of sublimation not a part of the model but an unexpected element.

Thus, I use Deleuze's models to assert that the representation of the sadist relationship between Chell and GLaDOS complicates the sadist nature as Deleuze's model was formulated on a heterosexual dominant male-passive female couple. Perhaps, the involvement of two women makes the sadist nature of their bond more transgressive of heteronormative sadism and fluid. The shift in power dynamics that equalized Chell and GLaDOS enabled Chell to help GLaDOS find her inner self as Caroline, GLaDOS' human existence. Caroline was similar to Chell, but she developed a superego that was GLaDOS. Consequently, GLaDOS unleashes her wrath on a person who is like her but not her. At the same time, she negates herself as a human

only to find that it is her conscious—it's her inner voice that she attempts to silence—again she projects her desire for a silenced moral voice onto Chell who ironically does not speak. Since the representation of sadism in the *Portal* narrative is questionable due to the importance of the role of sublimation, I also further examined the sadist model to better understand the way that the two female characters challenge and complicate Deleuze's sadist model. Since I do not seek to change Deleuze's model, I do show the manner by which the representation of the sadism departs from his model yet resembles it in distinct ways. Although I previously mentioned that the female characters articulate a new understanding of Deleuze's model—as opposed to having one dominant male role and one submissive female, I consider that the role of sublimation differs from the function of sublimation in the masochist model. For the sadist model, sublimation appears in each form of repetition of the cruel act imposed upon Chell until GLaDOS makes her transformation. I articulate this idea further in my explanation of the *Portal* narrative in comparison to the Lacanian analysis of the Greek tragedy, *Antigone*.

### *Sublimation Part of the Sadist Model? Comparison to Antigone*

While I do make sublimation an important concept of my explication of the theme of the sadist relationship, I still profess that their relationship is more indicative of Deleuze's model of sadism than his model of masochism. As I previously mention Deleuze captures Pierre Klossowski's study of Sade in a psychoanalytic perspective<sup>14</sup> by discussing the repetition of pain in the carnal act that transgresses into a spiritual one:

The carnal act can only constitute a transgression if it is experienced as a spiritual one; but in order to apprehend its object it is necessary to circumscribe and reproduce that

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<sup>14</sup> Gille Deleuze's perspective is not strictly psychoanalytic.

event in a reiterated description of the carnal act. This reiterated description not only accounts for the transgression but it is in itself a transgression of language by language, (as quoted in Deleuze, 1967/1991, p. 119).

I believe that the second death manifests a repetition of death that transgresses the limits of social law, a transgression primarily in the sadist model. In my analysis of the *Portal* narrative, the carnal act(s) are exemplified in different sublimated deaths such as GLaDOS' previous human death and Chell's recapture and frozen stasis. The different comments on Chell's death and reincarnated life and Chell's different instances of near death experiences through puzzle resolution demonstrate approximations involving repetition of certain deviated aims in order to get to the spiritual act. Similar to Antigone's strength and willful disposition to transcend the social law, both GLaDOS and Chell show a second death, a concept articulated in Lacan's analysis on ethics and desire as it appears in the Greek tragedy, *Antigone*.

According to Lacanian analysis of *Antigone*, *Antigone* exemplifies a form of beauty and love that transcends social and human limitations (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 247). *Antigone* is part of the Oedipus Complex, a Greek tragic trilogy. It chronicles the tale of Oedipus' children, birthed from an incestuous bond between mother and son. *Antigone*, the titular character, seeks to avenge the death of her brother, Polyneices, by giving him a proper burial, but Creon, her uncle, tells her that her desire goes against the law. In response, she disobeys Creon, her father figure and upholder of the law, and seeks to give her brother burial. When caught, Creon demands that she be buried alive in a tomb, causing her fiancé, Creon's son, to kill himself in grief, which causes his mother, Creon's wife, to kill herself. As such, Creon's order to have *Antigone* killed also caused two unanticipated deaths. My discussion, however, focused

primarily on Antigone's strength and desire to love and cross human limitations. Her strength and transgression depict beauty but also the limitations of beauty, elicited from the audience's admiration of her through catharsis.

Jacques Lacan (1986/1992) describes Antigone as a representation of a dual part of catharsis: purging of emotions and elicitation of desire. The representation of her character does both—she is beautiful, but a beautiful image that sets the audience away from her (p. 245). In the first scene, she initially speaks to her sister to bury their brother. Despite her inability to convince her sister to join her, Antigone reveals her beauty through her ability to remain steadfast to her love. He describes it as the “tempering of desire through the effect of beauty,” (p. 249). The play is about the transgression of social law and the sublimation of the death drive—not to say that Antigone does not avoid death as she does die at the end of the tragedy, but her actions towards death proves that it does not threaten her as it would for most humans (p. 254-255). He describes his analysis of Antigone as the signifier of the limit, which she transgresses. Her birth is a transgression beyond the limit, as is her will to bury her brother and to show more reverence to him than her fiancé, and to renounce Creon (p. 267). Showing a strong will, she speaks for herself and transgresses the social law. According to the notions of sadism, she takes the power from the patriarch. She pushes past *Ate*, which Lacan takes to be misfortune (p. 264). Yet, she seems to address her life as already dead.

In her first conversation with Ismene, her sister, she tries to persuade Ismene to bury Polyneices, who fought against their other brother, Eteocles. Creon honored Eteocles as a champion of the city, while Polyneices was perceived as a traitor and exile. After Ismene refuses, Antigone states that she will be loyal to her brother, “I will lie there with him, loved by the one I love, guilty of the crime of holy reverence. I will have to please those below longer

than those here, for there I will lie forever,” (Sophocles, 441BC, lines 64-66). While upholding the law of the underworld or the religious law, Antigone is also honoring her brother, thus it could be inferred that her duty is justified. Since her birth and existence—brought about through incest—counters the social law, one can perceive the naturalness in her willingness to fulfill both religious and familial laws: both her parents are dead and are related as mother and son, thus her own will to bury her brother/uncle coincides with the laws that she is upholding. Since her birth is unnatural, Antigone deems her own life as already gone, a liminal status between the dead and the living (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 278-279).

When talking to the Chorus about her fate about being buried alive, Antigone addresses her life as liminal (Sophocles, 441BC):

To the newly raised mound  
Of my strange tomb.  
Oh-ill fated woman,  
With no home among mortals  
Nor as a corpse among corpses,  
Neither with the living,  
Nor with the dead. (lines 806-812)

Thus, her will to die is similar to a Sadist<sup>15</sup> mode of ethics, in which one seeks moral choices because of pain associated with it. Lacan describes the sadistic will as that which incorporates morality for the sake of pain, or a sense of pleasure that accompanies pain, or a seeking of the Good that follows a similar structure to that of sadism as breaking the social law (Lacan, 1986/1992). Antigone is further depicted as expressing her pain of watching her first

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<sup>15</sup> When I use the capitalized version of sadism, it refers to an allusion to the writer Sade. So, I am using the adjective to refer to him as opposed to a common way of using sadism.

burial disintegrate before she breaks the law by giving him a second burial. Just as pain is resexualized and given a pleasurable tone in Sadism, Antigone's pain is recharged with a new intent to give Polyneices another burial in public view. Even though she lives in the earlier part of the play, she utters words of either being summoned to death or fated to die. Her proclamations refer to a will to die, a death drive, but one that ties in a rigid form of morality. When she purges herself of her grief, Antigone goes beyond the limits of human—cries like a bird when the wind blows the sands away from her buried brother. Her transgression of her human form foreshadows her ability to transcend both human and social laws, and I interpret this transgression as a demonstration of the resexualized drive, causing her to shift from a human limitations and limitations of desire.

Upholding Lacan's notion of love as enabling the inaccessible, Joan Copjec (2002) posits that Antigone's act asserted that her love for her brother allowed her to do the impossible (p. 43). In her assessment of sublimation as a separation from the Other and separation of self, Copjec positions Antigone's actions as extending beyond herself, transforming herself into something other than a mortal (p. 44-45). Due to her abilities to mimic a bird and then transgress the law through her actions—first, her decision to bury her brother, then, her decision to seek death—she extends beyond herself as a human being, showing the significance of change within someone when confronted with desire. By acting on her will supported by family law to give family members a burial, Antigone's transgression of the social law show that the social laws are not relevant to her, making her seem as if she extends beyond human capacity. Therefore, Copjec's Lacanian approach to sublimation reveals that one achieves satisfaction of the sublimated aim causing a separation of self and other. By explaining that sublimation as an ethical way to express desire without repression (p. 45), Copjec alludes to the independence of the subject's

drive, since the subject gains satisfaction through sublimation based on the subject's personal history not a social law.

Linking Creon to the superego, Copjec posits that Creon followed civil law, forbidding satisfaction of the aim. Furthermore, Copjec brilliantly discusses how the superego adheres to an idealization of social laws that are inherently based in dissatisfaction. Thus, Creon's role as the superego explains for his constant dissatisfaction, since he is positioned to perceive his inability to achieve the ideal through his attempts. Both the ideal and the process of achieving the ideal are dissatisfying (p. 45-47). Antigone is also a victim in that she is the ego that fights against the superego given the relationship between sadist superego or ego ideal and the ego. Creon attempts to torture her, but she moves past him to another limit—a second death. Lacan (1962/2006) describes the second death in his essay *Kant with Sade* as “the very decomposed elements of our body being destroyed so that they can never again be assembled,” (p. 655).

Since her punishment consists of being buried alive in a tomb, Lacan analyzes this as being caught between two deaths. But this theme is consistent throughout the play. Antigone is caught in misfortune since the day of her birth, so she cannot persist knowing that her existence is breaking a law. Yet her second death is also a form of life moving into death and a form of death moving into the sphere of life. The idea of being buried alive crosses this dimension of life crossing into death. Also it is Sadist in that it claims the death of the torture of a sadist's victims. The second death articulated in Lacan's work shows a connection to the previous discussion of the desexualization and resexualization process. The examples of sublimated death function as approximations to beyond the second death, where both characters, like Antigone, exist beyond

the social law and life. Using Deleuze's words, I perceive that the process of nearing a second death entails the reversion of the libidinal drive desexualized and resexualized<sup>16</sup>.

In the *Portal* series when Chell and GLaDOS simultaneously approach the limits of their second death, their resexualized energy moves back into sublimation, in which their libidinal desires are bound in efforts to achieve puzzle completion and a discovery of their identities. Since the power structure is shifted into Chell having power over GLaDOS, the relationship to pain also changes. Chell must still avoid death and pain in getting trampled over large pounding machines. Also, she must place the different gels in the strategically right places in order to avoid falling to her death from high planes. GLaDOS' life depends on Chell's success, and as she tries to save her energy source—as a potato battery does not allow her enough energy to enact pain or think—she also makes use of her passivity in order to uncover the mystery of the familiarity of Cave Johnson's voice. As Chell discovers the histories of the Aperture Center, GLaDOS listens to herself as Caroline and quietly relives the emotions of seeing the Center's failure and Johnson's death. Prior to Johnson's announcement of transferring Caroline into a computer system in Chapter 7, GLaDOS realizes her connection to Caroline and almost emotionally short-circuits. This causes an approximation to death in that she indulges in an emotion that reminds her of her life, yet the act itself endangers her. So, both female characters move beyond the limitations of life and approach the second death in order to learn a new facet of their characters. It is this bond between them that allows GLaDOS to release Chell, since GLaDOS can no longer hate someone who helped her find herself. When perceiving the *Portal* narrative within the domain of the sadist homoerotic relationship theme, one realizes that the

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<sup>16</sup> Again, I clarify that I am using Deleuze's formulation to assert my own. While Deleuze asserts that the drives are desexualized and resexualized, I use this explanation to assert the way that Chell and GLaDOS are both nearing a second death.

interconnection between love and death explains for the minimal plot design and the focus on character development.

#### *III.IV How the Theme Structures the Plot and Character Development*

The theme of sadist homoerotic relationship between the female characters invigorates the plot as being more than a puzzle adventure story in which the goal of the protagonist is simply to stay alive and solve puzzles. When perceived within a psychoanalytic lens, one perceives that plot as encompassing a love-hate narrative that reveals a distinct yet not separate plot development from the simple adventure plot. The plot development of the love-hate narrative originates from the time of Chell's initial testing to GLaDOS' lure to kill her—which has its different manifestations from emotionally charged comments to physical harm—to a shift in power in which she must trust Chell and discover her identity. Although it coincides nicely with the adventure plot, the love-hate plot differs slightly in that players perceive the interconnecting libidinal (love) and death (manifested as hate to the casual player) between the antagonist and protagonist as the main motivating factor for GLaDOS' cruel behavior as well as the inherent masculine power, a theme that I will explain in further detail in the next chapter. In the adventure plot, the comments are seen as motivators for Chell—and by extension, players—to overthrow GLaDOS, while the comments might be received differently in the love-hate plot. The comments are shifting signifiers of maternal love and admiration—the crueler GLaDOS is, the more she is willing to bestow attention upon Chell, as if being cruel is the only way she can articulate her desire. When power is transferred onto Wheatley, both the Chell and GLaDOS symbolize a different bond in which GLaDOS defends her against Wheatley similar to the way a mother defends her child or a lover defends his or her mate. In the denouement, GLaDOS

unveils her discomfort with having a human side and a conscience, a revelation which corresponds to the new cycle of repetition in which the carnal act is transformed into a spiritual act or the third synthesis is enacted (Kaufman 2010) and being is transformed and transgressed. Players read her reaction as aligning herself to Chell due to a revelation of her human side, as opposed to the idea that GLaDOS only sided with Chell for advantageous reasons to overthrow and destroy Wheatley. Under the theme of the sadist homoerotic relationship, the confession strikes players as the intimate unfolding of secrets that Chell helps to uncover for GLaDOS, despite her unwillingness to show her. Furthermore, it also explains GLaDOS' cruelty—it is a technique that propels Chell to work harder, and in Wheatley's admittance to using her method as opposed to his "civility." In contradistinction to the love-hate plot, GLaDOS' cruelty adds to the humor of the gaming experience, a detail that players experience evidently with the adventure plot. It makes sense that the humorous aspect of GLaDOS' treatment alludes more to Deleuze's masochistic model, since players would align themselves as Chell and recipients of GLaDOS' harsh treatment. Deleuze aligns irony to his sadistic model, and players sense the irony when analyzing the characters apart from their experiences of puzzle resolution. Perhaps for this reason, the theme of the sadist homoerotic relationship mostly contributes to the character development, since it reveals more of GLaDOS' motivations behind her cruel treatment of Chell.

By explicating this theme of the psychoanalytic drives, repetition, and sadism, one perceives the intricate ways that through monologue, GLaDOS' further character development reveals her personality to the players. Players have the option of making meaning from her strong disdain of having power inflicted upon her and her use of technology as a way to mask her desire. While Chell is not further developed since the player embodies her, the player better

understands GLaDOS' motives behind her obsession with testing. By sublimating her admiration for Cave Johnson, GLaDOS—through her human identity, Caroline—resorts to showing it through testing the test subjects. At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> period of the Aperture Center, Caroline tests for a solution for Cave's sickness, a part of the story that Cave explains through his audiotaped monologues. Yet, she also seems to internalize Cave's need to test as seen through her computerized identity as GLaDOS. By analyzing a combination of her need to test and her images on her computer screen, one perceives that GLaDOS seems to use technology as a means to obfuscate others' perceptions of her emotions. She uses scientific progress as a means to justify her cruel behavior. When examining the plot through this theme, one could infer that her voice became enveloped within technology, which becomes threatened when she is placed inside of an earthy organic being, the potato. Not only can GLaDOS sublimate her death, yet she can re-experience herself in different aspects through different bodies. The consistent feature is her ability to love in spite of the interruption of technology—she can love Cave, yet his love for testing gets in the way, just as she tested Chell and shows her admiration of her through her incessant comments on her technique. Thus, the theme of sadist homoerotic relationship better reveals GLaDOS' character as a being whose notions of love become interconnected with death and destruction. By extension, Chell's persistence to keep solving GLaDOS' puzzles also reinforce her fascination with puzzles, even though it makes her subject to GLaDOS' comments. While part of the novelty of the puzzles involve the game developers' abilities to pique the players interests while simultaneously making the puzzles challenging, I think that this aspect contributes to the perception of Chell's character as also seeking life through the possibility of death. While it is easier to witness the evident way that GLaDOS has transformed through the notions of the repetitious carnal act transformed into the spiritual act, Chell's role in GLaDOS'

transformation is crucial for understanding the characters better. This theme gives both women the cruel form of beauty better as explicated in the notion of the transgression of the second death. Alluding to Lacan's analysis of Antigone as the cruel form of beauty (Lacan, 1986/1992), I consider that Antigone's drive towards her convictions, causing a transgression of social law, provides a model for how both GLaDOS and Chell evince a similar form of beauty through their resilient will towards death, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. For Chell, careful excavation through the Aperture Center entails the approximations towards death; for GLaDOS, her appeal of death arises due to her ability to transgress it in different forms: human, potato, and machine. As a result, the irony of their similar situation—both confronting the other's approximation towards death—shows the way that signifiers, such as their intellect and courage, lead to a form of beauty, one that Lacan (1986/1992) differentiates from ideal beauty. In addition to exemplifying better character development, it also reaffirms the minor theoretical issue of their relationship following a sadist model rather than the masochist model.

If perceiving the *Portal* narrative within the sadist homoerotic relationship—one where repetitious carnal acts transgress pain into a spiritual act and new way of being—I see that the theme directs players to better perceive Chell and GLaDOS' character development beyond the roles of just a mute human and mechanical tyrant. Chell resembles Antigone in the sense that she is damned in her familial situation, thus trapped in a place without parents and living a liminal “not alive nor dead” status. Her adopted status is never explained, but it is an issue or a part of her identity that warrants insults from both GLaDOS and Wheatley, thus making her an abomination from a natural familial unit. Her near approximation towards death also compares her to Antigone, as Chell could be nearly buried alive in a large mechanical tomb. In the process of trying to kill her, GLaDOS taunts Chell about her weight for the mere reason to simply torture

and mock her. Although it is subtle, the standards of thinness and beauty are broached through the quantity of GLaDOS' comments on Chell's weight. Similar to Lacan's analysis of Antigone's beauty as simultaneously terrifying and striking due to her adamant focus on death, players perceive a focus on Chell's beauty through GLaDOS' comments. There is a contrast between GLaDOS' comments on Chell's large body stature and the beauty of Chell's determination in resolving the puzzles. By examining this contrast, players perceive that Chell's true beauty arises in the puzzle-resolution and her actions, since it involves achievement through the novelty of the different puzzles, especially in more intricate challenges that incorporate many steps. Through the sublimity in Chell's actions, the notion of beauty as disguise similarly is demonstrated in the games. The beauty in puzzle-resolution masks the fact that Chell is evading disaster in a dangerously dilapidated building, a view that a player would have if she did not perceive character development as being subsumed under the theme of sadist homoeroticism. Furthermore, if taking the presumption that GLaDOS is Chell's mother, I perceive that Chell also goes to extreme lengths to allow her mother to return to her body, in a way, allow her soul to go back to her computerized body.

In contrast to Chell, GLaDOS transcends human form by her transfer to a machine and a potato. She moves beyond any limit and becomes a terrifying creature, since she is indestructible. She cannot die or be destroyed because even when Chell destroys her, she can still be resurrected. She moves past Chell in this way. She also transgresses the paternal social laws in that she outlives Cave Johnson, even though he was her supervisor. She also changes the rules of the Center, and she is made to realize her transgression when she identifies herself as Caroline. Even though it was Cave Johnson's decision to put Caroline into a computer, she still turned the Aperture Center into her own vision, given her similarities to Cave's. While one can

say that GLaDOS is Chell's superego, it is also accurate to perceive Cave as Caroline's superego, yet through her realization of her humanity, she supersedes his role as Antigone did with Creon's paternal authority.

Chell and GLaDOS' union that makes them both surpass the human limit and move beyond the second death. For Chell, the second death is to test beyond the confines of the testing chambers, to find her way out nearly missing death. During *Portal 2* in Chapters 6-8, Chell and GLaDOS unite and uncover the underground Aperture Center, which has a series of different periods of the center. During this time, GLaDOS discovers her previous identity as Caroline, but she only does so in the body of the potato. She cannot withstand too much energy, thus she remains passive. But as Chell extends beyond the limits, sometimes involving getting repulsion gel onto her without having too many bad effects or using the portal gun to access places that she would not otherwise be able to do, GLaDOS also extends beyond her confines. She can be in one body, the potato, and find herself by listening to her other voice, the morality core. Through her liminal status between life and death, she is a machine yet one that has a conscience, a life. Only through her interaction with Chell can she realize her humanity—her life in her dead-like state. So while Chell is evading death and living within a tomb, excavating her way out, GLaDOS is reliving her existence as a dead person but living mind.

Yet, GLaDOS' transcendence of human form also echoes Antigone's own second death. GLaDOS is terrifying in a similar manner that Antigone goes beyond her own human limitations and defines a new way to justify her existence. While GLaDOS is not condemned for her birth from incest, she does battle with a superego, one who forces himself onto her desires to not be turned into a machine. She transforms into another organic state, a potato, just like Antigone appears birdlike and changes into a bird-like creature. This transcendence causes GLaDOS to

arise from Cave's influence over her as seen in her previous treatment of test-takers; she negates the internalized notions of destruction when she decides to save Chell and show concern for her.

Thus, the theme of sadist homoerotic relationship influences the way by which the *Portal* narrative is structured. As previously mentioned, this theme does significantly direct the plot into an interesting love-hate story of a dysfunctional family, and the theme also contributes to the strong character development. Only through this theme could players achieve the benefits of viewing the *Portal* series as a commentary on the perception of the libidinal and death drives in *Antigone*. While the story differs from the Greek tragedy, the multiple manners by which the audience receives or renders the task (as in the case with the games) is comparable: *Antigone* is portrayed according to the creative forces within a certain cast and production company, and the player assumes Chell's role with his or her particular subjectivities that control the manner by which she makes sense of the story. Despite the multitude in puzzle resolution, the player still achieves a narrative unfolding in a particular way due to the linear algorithms in the game. The relevance of such a comparison between a digital text and oral text shows that both mirror each other in terms of thematic development. Both stories involve female characters transgressing social laws that entail a rupture in social norms. While one narrative hints at a sexualized union between a brother and sister—albeit normalized within their family—the other story suggests a homoerotic battle between two women, both who break from expectations to audiences coming to the stories for the first time. While the stories also depict a rupture in gender norms—an idea that I discuss in the next chapter—both depict the interconnection between death and life.

By explicating the theme and showing its simultaneous rendering of the plot and characters, I demonstrate the manner by which the theme directs one interpretation of the narrative. My analysis also reveals *Portal's* progressive issues, not only in the radical perception

of the interconnection between life and death but also in the queerness of relationship between the protagonist and antagonist, thus indicating the potential for games to unravel deeper concerns than mere puzzles. This investigation helps prove that this series raises critical awareness of politics of identity: players do not merely play games passively, as the narrative permeates through their understanding of the games. In this case, the games showed insights on the homoerotic relationship and powerful women. Moreover, my analysis demonstrates my Critical Gaming Narrative Pedagogy, which involves the naming of narrative themes prior to investigating its deeper implications as well as its influence on the narrative elements. In terms of the theme discussed in this chapter, plot and character development were given paramount significance due to the theme's focus on love and death in a psychoanalytic perspective, which concerns the familial relationship. While I do broach the subject of gender as it appears in the analysis of Antigone and its comparison to Chell and GLaDOS, I further elaborate on GLaDOS' internalization of Cave Johnson's masculine nature. My psychoanalytic discussion of this internationalization incorporated a detailed analysis of the ego and superego and the drives, yet GLaDOS' release of this internalization is only an issue that occurs with a nonlinear sequence of time, an idea further elaborated in the next section of this chapter. The setting of the Aperture Science Center helps to render the theme of gender struggle, as it is the backdrop of the events yet also that which players manipulate to trigger such events.

## Chapter V

### *Findings: Gender subversion and Class Critique through Space Exploration*

In this chapter, I further examine gender depiction, primarily at the female characters, GLaDOS and Chell, and the way that their gender depiction intersects with male characters, particularly from their gaze. While I compare GLaDOS and Chell to Antigone's form of beauty and focus on GLaDOS' overtaking of Cave's paternal role in the sadist model in the previous chapter, I shift my discussion towards another theme in this chapter: the expression of a non-deterministic female gender identity by overcoming an internalized struggle of power. Through space exploration, one perceives gender identities of the female characters given GLaDOS' transformation, which she starts to question the macho, sexist, classist, unethical, and power hungry identity she internalized from Cave. Keeping with the idea that the theme encompasses the other elements of the narrative, I maintain the this theme also shows the relevance of setting on character development in addition to allowing players to perceive more of the social commentary issues. As I explicate the theme, I discuss the manner it influences the adventure plot and character development, since it does follow the linear gameplay more readily than the second theme discussed in the fourth chapter. Also, by discussing this theme, I raise critical awareness as to how game developers use space to show gender depiction of the female characters, giving players opportunities to reflect upon these representations beyond the purpose of game mechanics.

When considering GLaDOS' popularity, I initially think about GLaDOS as representative of Donna Haraway's cyborg from her essay, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and*

*Socialist Feminism in the 1980s*. Originally conceptualized as a way to consider ontology outside of binary oppositions, Haraway (1990) expresses a new revolutionary ideal of the cyborg as a partial being constructed of identity fragments, including organic parts from human, animals, and machines. The cyborg also embodies two different perspectives, one from being the aftermath of the last war and the other a site of political struggle from marginalized positions, such as women and people of color (p. 196). Moreover, due to the cyborg's combination of organic and mechanical fragments, this type of being mirrors the machines in humans or the human resemblance in machines (p. 222). Part of their being resists identity construction, as seen in the way that political identifying markers such as race, class, gender, and sexuality are used to support a hierarchy in a patriarchal society, yet the cyborg also arises from the resistance movements from marginalized people (p. 197) but also a product of patriarchy and socialism (p. 193). Thus, the cyborg is a being of contradiction and paradox. Haraway (1990) further expresses this being as encompassing contradictory differences brought together for an ideal:

The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity...No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution or social relations in the oikos, the household, (p. 192).

It is a romanticized view of GLaDOS fulfilling the role of the cyborg, especially in context that Haraway's vision of such being as partially ideal and unable to be fully captured in a representation. This ideal of the cyborg, however, does capture the idea of such a being that establishes a new way of being without adhering to strict binary gender roles. In that aspect, GLaDOS' gender identity ruptures the common notion of the feminine/masculine binary

construction. Yet, to explore GLaDOS' gender identity, as well as Chell's, one must consider the way that the use of space helps players perceive the way that two women display a wide array of gender identities.

### *V.I. Theme III Space Navigation Engenders Gender*

In Henry Jenkins' article, *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, he affirms the perspective of narrative aspirations in video games, explaining that games should not be reduced to just a story-telling experience, rather, games reveal narrative elements within the interactive experience (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins (2004) does indicate that not all games have narrative tendencies, yet games feature stories in a different way than traditional modes of storytelling as seen in novels, print media, and films (p. 673-674). Furthermore, game developers use navigation of space, or architectural game design, to have players experience stories by making meaning of visual cues. Detailing four different ways that game developers use space in narrative design, Jenkins (2004) asserts that video game developers reference story-telling techniques from science fiction stories, quest myths, and hero's odysseys (p. 675). Descriptions of land and space become more important than the plot development, as the setting becomes integral to the protagonist's journey. Rather than suggesting that rich description of setting minimizes the narrative value in stories, Jenkins asserts that the protagonist/player's exploration of the setting is part of their conflicts in the plot development. Stories in games and fiction of this kind make use of micronarratives, or the smaller stories in which a player confronts a conflict based on a particular localized setting. Using Eisenstein's film, *Battleship Potemkin*, as an example of film that uses micronarratives, Jenkins explains that Eisenstein's use of emotive short flashes of scenes—like the one of the peasant with the baby carriage—impacts

one's notion of the larger narrative by experiencing one of the shorter narratives. The shorter narratives contribute to the emotional impact or perception of the central conflict, while functioning as smaller units with their own particular conflicts (p. 679). One of the models, embedded narratives, makes use of smaller stories within a larger framework, such as the backstory or set of clues that a detective makes use of in detective fiction. Yet, the difference in fiction is that the game developer has more control over distributing particular artifacts in the setting in different ways. Citing *Myst* as an example, Jenkins describes games having this model as having two different narratives—one narrative that the player discovers through his or her interaction with the game, and the other with smaller narratives meant to contribute to the meaning of the larger story. These embedded narratives may involve smaller tasks such as excavating a new area, or solving smaller puzzles within the larger puzzle (Jenkins, 2004, p. 682). In the *Portal* narrative, the Rattman dens create an embedded narrative through the examination of the different dens in order to compile a longer story. While some players may ignore the dens for the purpose of just playing the game for the puzzles or look for the dens for the purpose of achievement points, I believe that examining the dens for clues about the characters gives a more intrinsic sense of achievement.

#### *Rattman's Gaze: Chell as Life; GLaDOS as Death*

Douglas Rattman, a former scientist in the Aperture Center, was the only human capable of successfully making it out of the Center. Due to his concern over Chell, he goes back inside the Aperture when GLaDOS drags her back into the Center just to help provide her with more clues. By walking through the dens, the player achieves the experience of Rattman's gaze, a level of perception that positions Chell and GLaDOS as subjects that they themselves do not

personally experience. Explaining the concept of the gaze as that which contributes to the notion of the split subject in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan (1973/1998) elaborates on the idea that the subject knows that she is consciously aware of seeing, but that she is not part of the overall picture in her own perception. The gaze is defined as something in one's perception that is eluded or slips past one's notice. By thinking of oneself as a subject, one is diminished because one is incapable of perceiving oneself within the picture. The light and screen filters one's view of reality, so that reality is marginal, adulterated from the effects of the filter. The gaze provides one with light that enables him or her to achieve its effects from which others perceive them, only to be disoriented from the effects of the screen (Lacan, 1973/1998). When considering Lacan's notion of the gaze, one better understands the way that reality is constantly eluded when one shifts one's focus on any particular object; one's notion of reality is not entirely reliable due to the sharp focus on an object, additionally obscured by the effects of the filters. In the context of the *Portal* games, I interpret Lacan's description of the gaze as an apt framework to describe the hidden aspect of the Rattman dens, as objects that are not fully within view unless one takes a different perspective. Also, the gaze also describes the idea that someone else is watching Chell outside of the player's awareness of it. So, while players embody Chell's character yet know relatively little about her, the depictions of Chell and Rattman's messages to her enact the theoretical concept of the gaze. Since the Rattman's male identity enacts the gaze, one must consider the relevance of Laura Mulvey's notion of the cinematic male gaze that perpetuates the use of women as objects.

Mulvey uses Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse to show that the cinematic gaze uses imagery to inform the Symbolic register. By using the gaze to determine one's independent ego, one enters into the Symbolic and attains an ego ideal with this misrecognition, a misrecognition

that initially began in the Imaginary Stage but further perpetuated with the Symbolic. One not only engages with others with this misrecognition but also continues to identify with others using the standards achieved in the misrecognition (Mulvey, 2009). Mulvey (2009) takes Lacan's phenomenological notion of the gaze and uses it to suggest that it becomes a cinematic tool that enframes one's ideological notion of women. Firstly, cinema enacts scopophilia since it presents desirable objects through the lens and framing of the object. Secondly, it also allows viewers to identify with the male subjects and to objectify not only the women on-screen but also the women who resemble the on-screen actresses (Mulvey, 2009). Yet, cinema also presents a sexist and heteronormative culture in which men become the subjects and women are the objects. At the same time, Mulvey explains that women pose a threat, their presence as symbolic objects of castration, so part of handling the anxiety provoked is to demean their role so that they are only objects, thus turning them into fetish items (Mulvey, 2009). Although Rattman can be perceived as having a gaze explained by Mulvey's formulation of the gaze, I make the distinction that Rattman presents a clean version of a fetishized object, only as a psychoanalytic object of life as opposed to an overtly sexualized object. Rattman represents Chell in a manner that expresses his desire for her, but he also incorporates her strength and abilities to effectively kill GLaDOS as part of his fetishistic desire for Chell. Through Rattman's gaze, one perceives the opposition of Chell as a heroine and her antagonist, the monstrous GLaDOS.

In *Portal: Still Alive*, players perceive Rattman's affections towards Chell in a subtle way through his precautionary messages and depicts her throughout the game, thus making it the only way that players become acquainted with her. In Chamber 16, the first chamber where the player finds the Rattman drawings, Chell/the player finds a den filled with inscriptions of "the cake is a lie" written 5 times accompanied by handprints and hash marks indicating a countdown

of times Rattman has tried to defeat the turrets or GLaDOS. Offering more advice for Chell, Rattman displays a pellet and the cube going through a portal, and a drawing of a turret accompanied with the words “Hello? Can I help you?” While functioning as advice for Chell, Rattman shows his concern for her by admitting GLaDOS’ lie and showing her a way to kill the turrets. By confessing that the cake is a lie, players suspect GLaDOS’ vindictive nature to offer the player a reward despite not being willing to sincerely give it if the player is successful.

In the Rat den in Chamber 17, Rattman has an ode to the companion cube, yet he extends the positive connotation of the cube to Chell, as a symbol of life with angelic qualities. When considering that Chell is now the object to his affections, a player may feel strange and objectified as a life object—a libidinal object—but also a sense of hope that someone else is watching her. Yet, the correlation also frames Chell as a symbol for life, a parallel to Chell’s own quest for life. Echoing the libidinal energy stored within the odes to the companion cube as seen in the images of cubes with hearts accompanying, the reference to Chell as an Angel is the first indication of his shift in admiration for her. Initially, there is a warning about the video cameras as it is represented with red paint adorned with the words, “She’s watching you,” suggesting that it is GLaDOS watching the tester. Adorning the cube with different hearts and pasting the cube on faces of pinup girls and historical figures, Rattman postulates that the cube will live forever and has ammunition power and food for immortality. He creates the opposition between life and death by referencing part of a poem “because I could not stop for Death, it stopped for me.”

Firstly, it could mean that he stopped thinking of Death momentarily, or he attributes Death onto GLaDOS. An interesting correlation is that prior to having Chell solve the test, GLaDOS mentions that one of the symptoms is to hallucinate that the cube is indeed alive. While

GLaDOS is correct in her assertions about the cube, one cannot help but question Rattman's observations: if he was wrong about the cube, could he be wrong about the cake? Regardless of the answer, Rattman's depiction of the opposition of GLaDOS as death and Chell as life is further represented in his other dens, thus teaching players to fear GLaDOS especially when taking a more drastic approach in his depiction of her in *Portal 2*.

In *Portal 2*, after Wheatley shows Chell where to get the blue portal gun, the player/Chell gets a view of Rattman's beautiful mural, furthering the comparison of Chell and an angelic symbol of life and GLaDOS as death. The mural itself includes four panels, which depict the narrative events including GLaDOS' emission of neurotoxin, Chell's defeat of GLaDOS, and Chell's extended sleep in the extended relaxation room. In one panel, there are a group of scientists huddled around the origins of GLaDOS, who appears as a bundle of a few coils of wires, and a group of scientists in white coats look calmly happy surrounding her. The next panel includes the scene of the effects of GLaDOS' emission of the deadly neurotoxin gas. In this panel, one female scientist and the other male scientists gasp, scream, and choke: the figures are either holding their necks or falling to the floor. Although GLaDOS does not have her head piece yet, as she appears large, like a coil of wires or a main computer center with slender black tentacles, the first depiction of her as a monstrous symbol of death. The middle drawing has Chell holding the portal gun at GLaDOS, whose electrical circuits are colored in red, indicating that Chell destroyed her. In this iconic drawing, Rattman depicts Chell as a strong yet slender shapely heroine in contradiction to the monstrous mass of coils. Arising from GLaDOS' body is an image of Chell's face with her eyes closed. Her face is filled with reddish paint, thus communicating that out of the destruction of the machine comes human life, which reverses the process by which Caroline became GLaDOS. Since this depiction of Chell is anamorphic in that

players do not usually perceive her face but rather red smoke, Rattman's gaze exemplifies more of Lacan's notion of the gaze, as that which reveals a detail beyond which the player usually perceives. When considering the meaning of Chell's face, as a symbol of life arising from mechanic destruction, Rattman's depiction becomes a less fetishistic image but one that nonetheless informs viewers of his desire over Chell.

By using the imagery of bloody intestines or bloody coils, it implies that Chell destroys GLaDOS even though GLaDOS is handing her a piece of cake with one of her tentacles. A figure with the orange head, which could be Rattman himself, looks happy as there are lines coming out of his head as if expressing exclamation while holding a companion cube. The panel to the right of the previously described panel shows Chell descending from a mess of coils and machinery debris towards her exit, while the figure holds the portal gun with extended arms reaching upward. Finally the last panel shows the iconic Chell resting in the extended relaxation room with her eyes closed. Her bodysuit is colored in orange, and the color of her cheeks matches the liveliness in her jumpsuit color. Not only is she depicted in a graceful and calm manner; her features are depicted gracefully and delicately, as if Rattman spent time getting the color composition and feeling of the drawing accurate.

Similar to Chell's restful pose in the mural, another portrait of Chell is presented in *Portal 2's* Test Chamber 17, depicting a more erratic rendering style than her peaceful state in the mural. After accessing a small walkway and passing by a strange depiction of the same repetitious drawing from Chamber 11—the figure with moon eyes and the words “This thing like seeing only Not with my eyes.” There are moon phases coming from his head, similar to the moon phases with the aforementioned quoted words. Walking further into a circular room, the player witnesses the portrait of Chell with an accompanying bell curve measuring her tenacity

and little turrets, who are looking up at her—Rattman probably drew this to depict her tenacity in killing them. Words accompany the bell curve and the portrait of Chell: “The Bell invites Hear the Turret For it is Knell, That Summons to Heaven or To Hell.” Given the scale of Chell’s figure over the smaller turrets, Rattman considers Chell more powerful due to her persistence despite his allusion to the turrets as threatening. The words indicate that there is a bell in the bell curve that represents Chell’s persistence that could either destroy her or liberate her by killing the turrets and moving beyond the obstacle that they present. The bell could be a means of comparison to the sound of the turrets that could either welcome someone to heaven or hell. It could also be a warning to Chell that the turrets, as examples of artificial intelligence, symbolize a knell—sound of a bell at a funeral—that really announces GLaDOS’ presence. This latter interpretation is salient when considering Rattman’s other depictions of GLaDOS as a symbol of death or a monster. In contradistinction to Chell as an angel, GLaDOS is further depicted as a black mass of coils, not expressing her previous humanity.

Specifically in *Portal 2*’s Test Chamber 3, Rattman further depicts GLaDOS as a monster, not a fully rendered character but only a depiction of her as a mouth, a metonymic relation to her caustic sense of humor. This den has two large drawings facing side by side: Rattman’s self-portrait and his enemy. On one side, there is a self-portrait of the Rattman in which he covers his face with his hands. His face is scribbled in black, while his hands are white. His mouth is open, and the other features are blurred or effaced. Out of his head are open books and books with numbers on them, specifically 2, 1, and 9, and accompanying him are the words, “Too Many Variables,” “Sucker’s Luck” in black words. The words “Exile” enclosed within white boxes. The books are depicted in yellow and orange, as if the life of the words in the book is flying out of his mind—or he has clearly lost his mind. The drawing facing his self-

portrait is a depiction of a huge mouth figure drawn in black and white with the words “vilify” on its teeth and arms and circular limbs extended from the body. Below the mouth figure are many black stones, possibly personality cores, and some red beneath them, as if it were blood beneath the figure. There are some words etched in black, “Don’t even TRY.”

Rattman receives sympathy for players who are attentive to the details on the drawings, as he attempts to depict that manner by which GLaDOS tortures him. By focusing on the power of her words, he portrays her ability to vilify others in her aggression to test takers. The rancor nature of the mouth depicts his perception of her words as ones that kill in addition to her ability to emit neurotoxin, perhaps creating a parallel between the neurotoxin gas and the effect of her words. Her arms reaching below indicate that she is crushing the robots or cores below her, thus proving her superior nature. The combination of the two drawings creates a micronarrative in describing the Aperture Center as a place where Rattman fears that GLaDOS thrusts upon him too many variables that make the tests unbearable and impossible to solve. Rattman has run out of solutions, yet GLaDOS perceives that it is his fault that creates her discomforting sensation caused by the test-taker’s lack of progress. It is a reaction built into her hard-wiring, but she is not always aware of this reaction—she simply perceives that others are trying to torment her. This drawing not only inserts Rattman into the overall narrative, but it also adds a detail of GLaDOS’ character, one that foreshadows other events in the narrative.

A few other details from other dens show more of GLaDOS’ character in addition to foreshadowing the narrative in the game. Echoing the drawing in the “vilify” den where GLaDOS is superior to the turrets, Rattman illustrates GLaDOS as a massive coil bursting in flames in *Portal 2*’s Test Chamber 12. Depicted with orange paint, a fire erupts with the words written in black “WHO ARE YOU?” written below the orange glow. Initially the player

wonders if Rattman depicts the turrets, since turrets repeatedly ask the question throughout the game. Yet, the question alludes to the idea that Rattman only partially depicts GLaDOS' nature; in his gaze, players see that she is a mean enemy of humans and robots alike. The question probes deeper as to GLaDOS' true nature, functioning as an example of foreshadowing. As I explain further in the second part of my analysis, Rattman only captures one part of GLaDOS' nature, at the level of the Imaginary. These images only present one aspect of GLaDOS' identity and mistakenly portray her as a monster without capturing the deeper essence of her character. Yet, this den is important in that it asks the question as if commenting on Rattman's unreliable perspective, since he does not account for GLaDOS' human identity.

Rather he persists to show her murderous side without taking into account her loss of memory of her own humanity. Instead, he uses a different test chamber, Test Chamber 16, to illustrate GLaDOS' killing of scientists, which continues the depiction from the mural in Test Chamber 2. This drawing shows a hand coming out of a group of bodies, which are an illustration of dead scientists piled on top of one another next to a machine that looks like GLaDOS. The words "unmorality" are written in red and match the bright hue of the orange hand cast against a black background. The hand seems as if it is coming out of GLaDOS, and the words refer to her actions of killing all the scientists with neurotoxin gas. Ironically, GLaDOS does regain her morality only after remembering her humanity, a detail that Rattman misses.

Another ironic point refers to Rattman's allusion to GLaDOS' all powerful gaze that scrutinizes humans and machines, yet he judges her for using a vantage point from which he uses to examine Chell. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* describes social and health democratic practices, which incorporate harsher disciplinary practices than those in a monarchy,

specifically the function examination as enacting a gaze in order to have subjects internalize that gaze. In order for perfect disciplinary practices to ensue, social systems, in particular the prison, require that one single central view that provides the light for the inmates (Foucault, 1975/1991, p. 173). He terms the gaze as “a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned,” (Foucault, 1975/1991, p. 173). Production and need for profit support the idea that heavy surveillance is needed in factories and schools, thus appropriating the capitalist ideology (Foucault, 1975/1991). If one can quickly see if error is made in production, one can easily resolve the problem, thus rectifying the cost of employing someone who cannot render the task and the faulty item.

Originally articulated through the notion of the Panopticon as a gaze that enables the prison ward to see the numerous prisoners without having the gaze reciprocated, the Foucaultian gaze incorporates devices and technologies such as observation decks, cameras, tests, that serve to correct behavior. Although this concept was originally conceptualized within a prison setting, Foucault mentions that it is enacted through the social services and behavioral facilities. The prisoner, student, and hospital patient all are evaluated through a series of tests, which prompt them to perform certain behaviors. In relation to the *Portal* games, this comparison aptly describes the way that GLaDOS is able to examine everyone’s movements. In combination to the discussion of the panoptic gaze and her depiction as a monster, GLaDOS functions similar to Louis Marin’s discussion of visitor’s postcards showing two different perspectives of Sear’s Tower observation deck. One image shows the view from the observation deck, displaying the totalizing power of the gaze over the Chicago cityscape, while the other shows the view of the Tower itself, a monstrous dominating form (Marin, 1993, p. 398-399). When breaking down the word, monster into monestrum and monstrum to suggest respectively that which warns and

announces and that which makes itself seen, Marin (1993) describes that the Sears Tower in itself is a marvelous figure that symbolizes that which it announces: the extraordinary and unique (p. 400). As a metaphor for Rattman's allusion to GLaDOS as a knell, she is the monstrous figure, who warns of the dangers within the Aperture Center. She is the symbol of death in that she not only aims to kill but also appears in such as monstrous form without any of the signifiers of humanity.

By stripping her of her humanity, Rattman depicts GLaDOS' as an unfeeling being, thus contributing to his depiction of her non-existent gender. Since players know GLaDOS is female, they make meaning of Rattman's depictions as giving her a gendered identity that is not recognizable as masculine or feminine, but rather, some nondescript evil form. Eradicating all connotations of the evil female sexual seductress or macho hyper-masculine body builder opponent, GLaDOS remains a mysterious seemingly genderless entity in Rattman's eyes. One should consider Donna Haraway's notion of cyborg monster in response to Rattman's depiction of GLaDOS as a monster: "Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman," (p. 222). While it is a revolutionary concept in Haraway's manifesto, it aptly depicts GLaDOS' non-binary essence, at least in Rattman's perspective that makes Rattman consider her a monster.

On the contrary, Chell represents life, as indicated, the hotness of the color in her orange jumpsuit that contrasts to her grey and bluish white background. The effect of perceiving Chell as a symbol of life, an angel, a heroine, makes the player perceive the uncontested terrain of Chell's gender depiction. Since the player embodies Chell, she cannot experience Chell's identity apart from his or her own identity, thus Rattman's depictions function as a Lacanian gaze

in that the gaze captures the split subject of the player's perception of Chell. Certainly Chell's tenacity and abilities to defeat GLaDOS mark her as a worthy heroine to her monstrous opponent, thus alluding to her strength and abilities. Chell's strength and tenacity make her exemplary for being a positive role model to younger female players, and her beauty marks her as a beautiful mixed racial woman whose slender shape seems to clarify GLaDOS' lies in commenting on Chell's heaviness. Moreover, by depicting Chell as a slender woman with dark long hair, almond-shaped dark eyes, full lips, and pale skin, Rattman depicts Chell's gender as a stereotypically pretty woman by current standards. While it may be progressive in that her beauty hints at her mixed racial status, her beauty still conforms to Western standards of femininity.

Similar to previous studies of another female protagonist, primarily Helen Kennedy's (2002) and Anne-Marie Schleiner's (2001) studies of Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, my analysis of Chell is complex in that she also functions as a strong positive role model for young female players, yet the limitations in getting to know her make her representation problematic. Previous studies of Lara Croft indicate that in addition to being a strong positive role model for young female players in that she is an active character, her depiction as a male heteronormative fantasy make her troublesome for some feminists (Kennedy 2002; Schleiner 2001). Despite Croft's early depiction of a voluptuous and hour-glass figured femme fatale (Schleiner 2001), other interpretations opened up possibilities for an opportunity to enact a vehicle for queer desire, or opportunities for queer women to fix their gaze on Croft (Schleiner 2001); Kennedy (2002) took a more radical position in suggesting that Lara Croft offered male players opportunities to have a transgendered experience through embodiment with Lara Croft—their identification with the object of their desire offers them another perspective that could

inform their false sense of femininity in so far as male desire and fantasy revolve around an unrealistic virtual object (Kennedy, 2002, p. 10). Since players were able to see Lara Croft due to the third-person perspective, the depiction of Chell elicits less provocative interpretations. Due to the ambiguous nature of Chell's identity, Rattman offers the players a third-person perspective to uncover the mystery of her gender and racial identity. Jennifer de Winter and Carly Kocurek (2015) interpret Chell's silence and marginalized experience—perceived in her attempts to survive and fight against those who oppress her with violence—as the optimal vantage point for women of color and female players to identify with Chell and project their experiences onto her. Thus, I could read Chell's depiction as comprising between the player's own projected identity onto Chell as apart from Chell's depiction.

One can perceive Rattman's gaze is limited even in his depiction of Chell because it does not account for the player's unique experience of what she can determine about Chell through embodiment. In theoretical terms, Rattman's Lacanian gaze as indicative of perceiving Chell, yet it could still disorient her from her reality in that one could argue that the gaze perceives her as an entity that still eradicates her from being. When Chell is in the act of being, her images only capture one instance, a view that looked very different from the experience of killing GLaDOS and resting in the extended relaxation room. Rattman's gaze is only one example of the exploration of gender identity through space navigation, especially in reference to both female characters but more specifically to GLaDOS. GLaDOS' transformation in gender arises when exploring the space in *Portal 2*, when the players walk through the space and solve puzzles while listening to the three different time periods in the history of Aperture Center.

By examining gender identity through the Rattman's gaze, the game developers present an opposition between the protagonist and antagonist that is heightened by the player's tendency

to perceive nothing beyond this opposition. Yet, more critical players question the motives behind GLaDOS' mean behavior, suggesting a deeper reason for the opposition. Aside from providing plot twists and description of character, space exploration is a tool used in providing narrative in the game. The setting is crucial, yet secondary to the theme since the theme envelops the use of the setting. The setting is only a tool in demonstrating the theme of gender identity and transformation of one particular identity. Game developers do use space in the game to develop the narrative, but usually the artifacts in puzzle adventure games are more central to the story. I perceive that a crucial theme in the use of space in the games alludes to the manner by which one minor character, Rattman, impacts the player's perception of the female characters even if he gives a partial view of these characters. It gives players opportunities to contest, argue, or hint at the identities of Chell and GLaDOS. Instead of just remaining minor details, Rattman's artifacts enhance the player's understanding of the backstory and details of each female character. In a similar way, the three different time periods of Aperture also function as audio artifacts, or artifacts such as monologues or comments that give players clues on better understanding the gameplay and narrative. In this example, players navigate space, which triggers algorithms to have Cave speak or GLaDOS respond. Through the exploration of various spots on the Aperture Center, players unravel clues to GLaDOS' identity. Since the audio artifacts consist of walking through the different parts of the past, there are moments when a recent past is the future time for a previous moment in the past. Given that the present, past, and future are all intermixed, I discuss Gilles Deleuze's three syntheses of time as a concept that suits the experience of triggering the audio artifacts.

*Portal's Fusion of Past, Present, and Future, and Deleuze's Syntheses of Time*

As my theoretical foundation to describe the player's interaction with audio artifacts, I use Gilles Deleuze's syntheses of time as discussed in *Difference and Repetition*. I briefly discussed it in the previous chapter in terms of the psychoanalytic discussion of the libidinal and death drives, but in the context of this chapter, it helps solidify the way that space navigation as Chell/the player shows a unique fusion of time. Deleuze (1968/1994) describes the theory of repetition within the three synthesis of time: the present as the agent of repeating, the past as repetition itself, and the future as the moments that are repeated (p. 94). Repetition must go through these three different cycles in which each moment in time draws upon a difference between each repetitious moment.

He describes the first synthesis of time as involving habit and contemplation, both processes he terms passive. Linking the present moment with passiveness, he further postulates that humans exist by the act of contemplation, such as the example of thinking about their own existence, as a habit done in the present moment (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 75). He describes that the mind contemplates difference in repetition, thus in passive synthesis, when acts are repeated, one's mind contemplates the differences between repetitious moments. Elaborating on the example of the image of the scar, he elaborates that the scar brings up the present moment of the experience of being wounded as opposed to contemplating about the moment that the person received the wound (p. 77). The first synthesis of time, the passive, present synthesis of time, incorporates human needs and inquiries, and it forms a foundation for the active past synthesis of time. The past synthesis of time is derived as memory that allows the present moment to pass through it (p. 78). Although it sounds backwards according to linear time as one considers that the past should move through the present, Deleuze (1968/1994) explains that the past is the active element that allows humans to perceive the present. Memory as the past is drawn to a

particular instant in the present, but the past synthesis of time is a notion of time that comprises of all possible moments in the past.

Deleuze (1968/1994) distinguishes between the particularity of the present moment and the former present, while the past remains general. Clarifying that these two forms of the present do not form a linear sequence of events but rather the possible repetitious moments within the present time—the former present is represented through memory, or the past time (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 80). Deleuze (1968/1994) describes the active synthesis as “the representation of the present under dual aspect of the reproduction of former and the reflection of the new,” (p. 82). Thus, the past is the agentic force that allows for the present, which can entail different past moments with them. Using the metaphor of a story with different lives, Deleuze (1968/1994) explains that the past active synthesis moves through the present moments providing the foundation even though some parts of the past are irrelevant to particular present moments (p. 84). While it is difficult to illustrate in real life situations, this abstract idea of two passing presents and past represented through the presents is better exemplified in novels where reminiscence is concerned. Using Proust to illustrate his point of involuntary memory in reminiscence, Deleuze describes that the past represents the two present moments, one that reveals what one is and the other that reveals would one *could be* (p. 85). Comparing the world of Ideas to the infinite possibilities of the past, Deleuze reminds the reader that the past is the foundation, which stores numerous successive present moments, aligned to the past that correlate to a particular present moment (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 85). The second synthesis of time turns to a third synthesis that will implode time so that instead of following a logical sequence, as a movement, the time becomes an infinite sequence of possible moments.

Deleuze (1968/1994) explains the third synthesis of time as a static pause, or a caesura, that breaks time and any previous logical order of time, thus showing a new version of past, present, and future times (p. 89). Comparing the notion of time to a hero's journey, Deleuze (1968/1994) indicates that in the first part of the hero's past, she cannot fulfill an action due to feeling inferior to the act itself. In the second time, the hero is presented with the act, but the hero feels that she perceives the image of herself in relation to act, or she can envision herself engaging in the act. Thus, there exists a change in the present time when the hero is confronted once again. The third repetition of the act shows the results of the act, which is larger than the hero and engulfs the hero. It is in this synthesis of time that something new is produced due to the repetition of the past and the present moments (p. 89-90). In relation to repetition, Deleuze (1968/1994) posits,

We produce something new only on condition that we repeat—once in the mode which constitutes the past, and once more in the present of metamorphosis. Moreover, what is produced, the absolutely new itself, is in turn nothing but repetition: the third repetition, this time by excess, the repetition of the future as eternal return, (p. 90).

Citing Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the eternal recurrence, Deleuze describes the future as encompassing a possibility of a new event in which it occurs due to its similarity to an event in the past. Deleuze explains that the eternal return can only occur in the future, when the notion of time is disrupted and cycles into a new order, one that does not involve the doer of the action or the background context (p. 90). The circle composed in the second synthesis of time implodes and becomes decentered and a new circle although different from before.

Although Deleuze's syntheses of time comprise a novel formulation in its conceptual nature, I borrow it to assert the new sequence of time as a player uncovers GLaDOS' gender

identity. Through repetitious testing, GLaDOS finds herself in the eternal return, through the retrieval of identity through GLaDOS' recollection and repetition of previous events. Players perceive her transformation from a feminine secretary, Caroline, to a cyborg with multiple gender expressions. I use Deleuze's three syntheses of time, to demonstrate the repetition of time shows a GLaDOS' gender identity and a transformation of this identity through the eternal return. This transformation clarifies Rattman's uninformed perception of GLaDOS as a character, since he died prior to witnessing GLaDOS remember her previous human identity as Caroline. Throughout my explanation of the second part of this theme, I make note of the different time periods and the visual and auditory artifacts portraying the amount of wealth and sexist nature of the setting. As articulated in Deleuze's concepts, the syntheses of time presents a return of something new, produced in the past, passively lived in the present, and presented in a new way that causes drastic change. In the case of the *Portal* game series, it causes a transformation in GLaDOS' character so much so that she releases Chell, an action that eradicates the conflict of the series. I believe that GLaDOS re-experiences the damage in having her internalize the sexist, immoral, and classist nature of the labs, causing her to dissolve the conflict. To situate Deleuze's explanation of the three syntheses of time in the game, I preface that the present time is Chell's/the player's walking through of space and solving puzzles, the past is the collective images and audio taped recordings from the three different time periods, and the future is represented by GLaDOS' emotional outbursts and her realization that she does have a conscience that will impact her decisions in the future<sup>17</sup>.

As I explain the three time periods of the game—all reflecting the past—I also elaborate on the sexist nature of Cave's comments, including his comments towards Caroline's prettiness,

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<sup>17</sup> Just to clarify, I proceed in my discussion and refer specifically to Deleuze's syntheses of time throughout my explanation of the different times, yet it is my use of Deleuze's concepts not Deleuze himself who uses the *Portal* games to explain his ideas.

and his prejudice towards lower class people. The time periods show a decline in the Lab's wealth that corresponds to a decline in Cave's health. I use the terms, Successful Era 1950s, Bankrupt Era 1970s era, and the Technoculture Era to denote the different times in the past. The present time constitutes a player's/Chell's moment of walking through the space and solving the different puzzles that incorporate the three different gels, repulsion, propulsion, and conversion respectively. As I discuss the details in the game, I elaborate on the gameplay in a way that assumes that the player takes her time examining the different artifacts, thus my explanation does not consider those players who rush through the game to quickly solve the different puzzles. Moving through the present allows the player to access the past, whose artifacts make the setting more engaging.

### *Successful 1950s Era*

After Chell helps transfer Wheatley into GLaDOS' body, he drops both Chell and GLaDOS into the bottom of the Aperture Center, which is cleverly concealed from test-takers. A player's initial examination of the abandoned lobby shows the previous amount of wealth that Cave Johnson, the CEO, spends on his company's décor and on his testing candidates. After finding her way to a large circular door and opening a side entrance to the Successful Era 1950s, Chell/the player perceives a sign, "Welcome to the Future of Tomorrow! Aperture Science Innovators." Not only does this era introduce the player to the apex of Aperture's financial success and early success, it also demonstrates Cave's sexist behavior shortly after the player walks through the sign. The player/Chell overhears Cave Johnson welcoming war heroes, Olympians, and astronauts to Aperture Science Innovators. After informing them that he sought

out the best candidates to test, Cave introduces Caroline as a “pretty woman married to science” and comments that she is as sweet as “a doll.”

Encapsulating the present synthesis of time, the player navigates through the opulence of the Successful Era. Within this moment of the game, contemplative players notice that the pretty office décor harkens back to expensive looking department stores. While the player notices the 1950s retro décor, she contemplates on the different fixtures to construct a story of the past. Some of the artifacts include the linoleum green tiles, large tiled walls, large spacious rooms, nice desk lamps, large wooden bookshelves, a large red velvet-looking curtain, with huge spherical ceiling lamps. The office has black old-fashioned telephones on large desks with old typewriters or cash registers. The light fixtures mirror the large sphere in the room that connects all the histories of the Aperture Center, showing cohesion to the reception lobby to the sphere in the big room. In the lobby, there are sofa chairs and desk lamps in a small area, creating a small relaxation area for test subjects. On one side of the wall next to Cave’s black and white portrait are two display cases for trophies and prizes. Thus, the pretty décor suggests that Cave had financial means, which evinced by his initial success as an amateur scientist.

As Chell/the player closely examines the cases, she sees the precursor to Aperture Science Innovators, a company called Aperture Fixtures that assigned Cave the Best Salesman of Shower Curtains in 1943. The glass case has many trophies that Chell/the player can only examine behind the glass, not by physically touching them. Throughout his life, Cave Johnson was awarded trophies such as the Department of Defense for the Best Contractor of the Year, the 1955 for Potato Science, the best promoter of Potato Science in the State of Idaho and the Best Salesman of Shower Curtains. Aperture Science Innovators, Cave’s company, was awarded recognition for being one of the Top 100 Applied Science Companies in 1949. There is a

newspaper clipping of his purchase of a salt mine in order to build his Science Center underground, since the future of science is to experiment underground, thus indicating that The Aperture Center is an underground salt mine in Michigan. Next to the Potato Science trophy, there is another certificate that states that in 1947, Aperture Science was awarded the Best Science Company in the U.S. With all these artifacts the player rationalizes that Cave must have been a persuasive salesman or a lucky innovator in shower curtains and potato science, two ridiculous feats. Corresponding to the imagined pride that Cave must have felt in order to display his awards, his portrait reveals a dream-like state.

The player considers Cave's idealistic look off to the right as an indication of the hopes he felt his company would provide, similar to the words on the sign, "Welcome to the Future of Tomorrow," which merely indicate a future that will never be. With a head full of hair, Cave smiles placing his hands under his chin. His smile connotes trickery or happiness for his own accomplishments when read with his trophies and certificates. The color of the portrait denotes a distant era when TV shows and pictures were in black and white, perhaps mirroring the idealism of 1950s TV shows. When taking all of these symbols into consideration, the player perceives that Cave is strong in his abilities to persuade and mislead. His achievements are not very admirable, yet it is strange that he is awarded them as if selling shower curtains or conducting potato science are paramount professional achievements.

Yet, after entering the main testing area for the best candidates of the world, the player realizes that Cave's idealism blinds him to induce his high quality test-takers to immoral scientific practices, leaving the player to question whether he conducts real science. In context of Deleuze's notion of the past synthesis pushing to the present synthesis, I interpret the player's act of listening to the overhead tape recording prior to solving puzzles as enacting this notion.

The past recording of Cave's crazy examples of science disorients a player as she attempts to simultaneously solve puzzles. When the player is passively listening to Cave's voice, however, the player embodies the passive present synthesis of time in which she contemplates the current situation of navigating one's way around a vacant space. Since Deleuze considers the living experience as one of habit, I perceive that even the player's active exploration of space and observation of artifacts alludes to the present synthesis of time; for the most part, Chell's/the player's preoccupations are to stay alive. For the exception of a few signs, such as the previous history of the Blue Repulsion Gel, most of the artifacts are auditory. For instance, Cave describes certain control experiments such as injecting test subjects with praying mantis DNA, causing them to turn into giant praying mantis. Other examples include the Control Group Kepler, which has testers with a microchip the size of a postcard inserted into their brains with no cure if they overheat in their brains. Cave's intention is to inject substances into the test-takers' bodies without their informed consent yet warning them after the injection in case of unanticipated negative reactions. His unethical science procedures coincide with his sexist and prejudice towards accessibility to all employees.

During the Successful 1950s period, Cave entertains the player with his extensive monologues about his thoughts on the scientists' concern for safer science practices and for access for the disabled. In response, Cave mentions that such proclivities for safer science alludes to soft science and that "the eggheads of psychology would not know adventure if it snapped them by their pink bras." With a louder voice, Cave shouts, "if they wanted safe science, why don't they marry it?" Thus, Cave is alluding to the disdain that more experimental sciences such as the hard science, perhaps physics and electrical engineering, hold over the softer natural and social sciences. Aligning the soft sciences with femininity as alluded to by "pink

bras” and “marrying,” Cave shows that ethical sciences that show concern for human thoughts are not “real” science, similar to the role of femininity in contrast to masculinity. He upholds such sexist masculinity when he further shows disdain for caring about the disabled and handicapped by not wanting to waste money on building ramps instead of stairs. As the present moment of solving puzzles and listening to Cave’s comments as Chell/the player walks to the next puzzle, the player realizes that the past slides itself into the present synthesis of time. Cave’s sexist comments are outdated like his portraits and dated like his trophies, yet the fusion of time allows the player to question the irony of Chell’s identity of a woman successfully solving the tests—an ironic feat unforeseen by Cave.

When Chell encounters the Blue Repulsion Gel, or the gel that makes one bounce when landing on it, I interpret that it evidently exemplifies the past synthesis of time pushing into the present. Before the player/Chell notices a sign about the history of the gel, Cave mentions that a previous test involved a guy who broke every bone in his body because he thought that blue paint was the repulsion gel. The past pushes itself into the present in that it might cause the player to react in nervousness or laughter right before noticing a sign about the blue gel. Headed with the words, “Did you Know?” written in a lighthearted quality, the sign centers on blue gel looking like toothpaste on a spoon. In smaller font words underneath the image describe its previous function as a dietary substance made from fiberglass that made previously digested food bounce off the intestines, thus it was pulled off the shelves. As the player proceeds to use the gel to bounce to specific locations to solve puzzles, she considers the dangerous qualities of the gel, thus making the present moment a lived moment from the past. Since Chell/the player successfully resolves the puzzle in a future time than the first test trials, her success marks an unforeseen past once the player moves beyond each puzzle in this era.

Not only a mode to add suspense to the puzzle solving, the effect of the past onto the present informs the narrative as it leads players to suspect more secrets that the Lab harbors in its history. The player discards the opulence of the beautiful décor in this section of the Lab's history when looking at signs such as a simple triangular shaped one with the words, "Together we can make 1956 the lowest unexpected casualty annum ever!" The effect is similar to Cave and Caroline's greeting as the player leaves, as he seems to denigrate her role as a secretary to that of a sweet little doll. After he congratulates the player for making it out alive—an ironic nod to Chell's challenge in the first game—he tells Caroline to say goodbye, which prompts her to repeat, "Goodbye Caroline," to which he replies with a compliment that comes off more like an insult. By engaging with the audio and visual artifacts, the player uses the present moment of game playing to learn more about the story itself—the story becomes more integral to the player's ideas about the setting and its relationship to GLaDOS' history. The player begins to suspect that with the past events, she can select the clues that made GLaDOS emit the deadly neurotoxin.

### *Bankruptcy Era 1970s*

Similar to the way that the Successful Era 1950s showed color cohesion in the rooms with the exception of the use of blue in the gel and sign decoration, the Bankruptcy Era 1970s used a tacky yellow and orange office décor, signs, and propulsion gel. This era depicts the downfall of Aperture Center as seen in Cave's description of his new test-takers and his emotional outbursts over economic failure. Even though a few artifacts, such as slides from a projection board in empty offices from *Portal: Still Alive*, reference Aperture Science Innovators' bankruptcy, Cave's anger during the Bankruptcy Era 1970s is apparent through his

monologue. After portaling to a small office with orange and yellow tiled floors, Chell/ the player hears Cave begin to address the new test-takers by mentioning the large contract the size of a phone book, which makes players consider that the unethical nature of the previous tests made Cave responsible for informing new test-takers. Yet, he further comments on the way that waiting 20 minutes in the waiting room is more comfortable than the park benches where Cave and Caroline found them, thus alluding to the possibility that the test-takers are homeless. Moreover, Cave alludes to two hardships that overcame the Science Labs, the oppositional company, Black Mesa, stole their ideas, and the 1968 Senate hearings criticize Cave for his testing, thus causing the Labs to go bankrupt. In one office, Chell/the player finds GLaDOS as a potato in a nest with birds picking at her, awakening Chell/the player to the present day. She implores that you help her, since it is the only way to transfer her into her body again. Despite the player's doubts as to whether an alliance is a good idea, the game mechanics give no other option than to take her and proceed on the mission.

The more critical player explores the space, a decision that allows for optimal use of perceiving the past active synthesis of time: the more the player perceives that the past only reinforces the way players experience the present moment. Upon entering the new lobby, which resembles a dated doctor's office, the player finds a typical reception desk with a phone and pad of paper on it. Instead of a nice welcome sign, the words "Test Subject Waiting Area" are on the wall next to the reception area. The orange and yellow tiled floors give a sickly feeling to the room. On one side there is a ticket dispenser, which indicates 426 and a chipped sign labeled with the words, "Please take a number" with the red arrow pointing downward. On the wooden paneled walls, there are three posters, all illustrating figures happy with \$60.00. The sign immediately next to the reception desk depicts a man next to a cruise ship, which has a price tag

of \$60. The man wears a pair of black and brown plaid pants, a black jacket, an orange scarf, and black shoes. The cruise ship gets larger in the foreground, as if it is coming towards the viewer. Another sign is of a smiling man wearing an orange jumpsuit holding money in his hands. The dollar bills look like they don't add up to \$60, as if the company is using propaganda to sell desire for others to test their scientific endeavors. When turning one's view to the right, one sees two arranged rows of chairs with backs against each other, which face the rows of chairs that are against the wall. In one corner of the room, there is one dead plant, perhaps a signifier of what is to come or the death of Cave's hopes.

Similar to the Successful Era, Cave also has a self-portrait in this era, but it displays a loss of all his idealism. Instead, an older Cave—as indicated by his frown and receding hairline—looks at the viewer with a serious smirk. Standing in front of a yellow background, he evinces sadness and anger—hinting at the failure of the Aperture Innovators. Cave still partakes in 1970s fashion as seen in his clothing, a black shirt and suit, and use of sideburns. A player may consider the changes in tone when Cave addresses him or her, noting a contrast between the Successful Era and the Bankruptcy Era.

Illustrating the present synthesis of time after seeing Cave's portrait, GLaDOS ironically asks if she missed anything, foreshadowing precisely her predicament that leads her to lose her morality. Both GLaDOS and Chell overhear Cave ask Caroline about compensation packages for the new test-takers, to which both Caroline and GLaDOS respond with “Yes sir, Mr. Johnson.” Regardless of whether the player/Chell solves the puzzle as GLaDOS voices her confusion, the player notes that GLaDOS' admiration for Cave was innate, as if it were hardwired into her system even as a human. When she starts to consider the deeper implications of her own reactions, GLaDOS' circuit breaks, causing her to be silent. In this instance,

signifying a moment in the past synthesis of time, namely Caroline's diligence in work, actively moves the present moment, which is Chell's navigation of space and puzzle resolution, yet it also breaks into the future synthesis of time. GLaDOS' outbreak at her own reaction was one of shock, as a revolutionary step to encroach on her, causing her to short-circuit. In addition, her emotional outburst hints at the significance in an additional visual artifact, one that the player/Chell will not yet encounter but will more clearly allude to GLaDOS' connection to Caroline.

In an office next to a stairway is a portrait, which GLaDOS asks the player to investigate on the possibility that it could be important, thus showing the fusion of the present, past, and future syntheses of time, an idea I further explain and borrow from Deleuze's notions of time. Like her innate reaction to Cave, GLaDOS is correct in that the portrait is a large piece of the puzzle despite being uncertain as to the reason. The portrait of Cave and Caroline shows their relationship as being more tender than strictly professional. Wearing a brown suit, he wears a hook mustache and sits down in front of a library with a wry look on his face—a smirk but one that is also crestfallen as if he is thinking about his financial woes. Caroline, wearing a white dress and a small white and red scarf around her neck, stands above him. She has a pale face and dark hair falling past her shoulders. While she gazes knowingly at the viewer, she looks less upset and jaded than Cave, perhaps due to her younger age. Her hands are curiously placed over his left shoulder, as if providing him support for all his decisions and directions for the company. The portrait is a symbolic depiction of their relationship, clarifying their closeness in the audio taped recording. One can see the sarcasm in his face in his wry smile, while her support and adamant acquiescence to his commands can be seen in the way she delicately puts her hands on his shoulder. This image reminds the player of the previous audio recording of Caroline

reminding Cave that they must still conduct science experiments after one of his emotional outbursts concerning bankruptcy. Yet, this portrait also triggers a thought within GLaDOS, a thought that she cannot fully explain yet ponders on the possibility that it leads to a clue for Chell. The unforeseen future event, GLaDOS' suggestion to Chell, also functions as a way that GLaDOS reconfigures the events in the past that convince her to have Chell re-examine the poster: although GLaDOS does not know its significance, the act of seeing it again has made her reconsider that the figures and the manner of their depiction as clues to use Chell's puzzle-solving techniques for a future event. While GLaDOS might indicate this specific event as "getting back into my body," there is another unforeseen event in the future that hints at the eternal return, in which techniques of the present and past reconfigure for GLaDOS' and Chell's future.

While it may seem extraneous to examine Cave Johnson's behavior, it is related to GLaDOS, since she does internalize his treatment of the test-takers. Cave's comments on the social status of the test-takers and the signs on the wall refer to his own embarrassment for being the class that he condemns. For example, he mentions that with all the operations that he is offering them, such as giving them new vitals and taking out their tumors, they should be paying him. Despite its humorous aspect, his comments reveal that the consequences of his bankrupt company do not make him change his unethical science practices. Rather, he is even more disdainful in having to follow regulations.

One specific sign contributes to Cave's lack of concern for safety regulations, possibly a consequence of falling into bankruptcy and gaining a reputation for killing quality test-takers. One simple sign suggests that Cave committed safety and health violations because it tells test-takers to "Remember...alert your supervisor if you see..." and includes a list of government

officials and press media people. Thus, Cave shows more of an unwillingness to comply with new building regulation codes, and he slyly infers that hard science requires the sacrifice of one's life to further scientific development. After leaving the Bankruptcy Era, the player cannot help but contrast the Bankruptcy and Successful Eras, especially in terms of what the games might indicate about capitalism. I believe the criticism lies more on Cave's unethical practices, which arises from the capitalist drive to produce results faster than any other company. As indicated in his voice recording, Black Mesa, a rival company, stole their ideas, thus proving the instability of success in the capitalist market. A player perceives the previous moment in the past in which she recalls Cave's trophies for his early contributions to science in combination to the decline of the Aperture center as seen in the signs and recording in the Bankruptcy Era.

Referring to Deleuze's syntheses of past and present times, the two moments in the past allow for the player to determine a transformative moment in which Caroline starts to assert more power in her reminder to Cave, "sir, we're still testing" after his diatribe on the financial status of Aperture. Her calm yet nonchalant vocal tone refers to an unforeseen effect in Cave's treatment of the two genders. Previously disregarding softer feminine science, Cave does not yet recognize that Caroline is subtly asserting her power over him. As seen in their portrait and her increased involvement with the testing procedures, Caroline's power shows a transformation of her past, which actively asserts itself in the player's present moment of witnessing Aperture's state of decline. The past recordings collectively inform the present moment that the player experiences while solving the puzzles. The past moments lead to a future time that changes the manner by which the characters perceive life and time. The portal device disregards time as seen through the signs and warnings that Cave indicates to the test-takers; he mentions that if they should run away if they see a future version of themselves. Other signs that show figures

watching future versions of themselves to warn test-takers to ignore any warnings. It is ironic that the narrative seems to do exactly what the signs warn test-takers not to do; the portal device is the most apt example of the Deleuze's syntheses of time. If one of Aperture's fictional test-taker from the future could warn the past test-taker, the present moment is subsumed with the collision of past and future, thus causing for a new sequence of time. The player as Chell, however, does not experience this predicament through her embodiment with Chell. More importantly, the fact that his test-takers' lives are reduced to casualties in the name of science infers a moment in the future in which notions of life are transformed for one that evinces the eternal return.

As in the previous two eras, the offices, portrait, and signs depict the state of the company, Cave's wellbeing, and the new life forms of employees. The visual artifacts correspond to Cave's monologues, which aptly demonstrate his deathlike state. As in the other eras, the Technoculture Era has a reception room, neighboring offices with descriptive visual signs, and Cave's portrait. The offices reveal a whitish blue tint, corresponding to the white Conversion Gel used in this era but also the symbolic static environment of the offices. Before the player sees Cave's portrait, the infamous poster on paradoxes and rogue AIs informs the player to the new addition to Aperture's staff. Enclosed in a thin yellow and black hazard frame, there are a series of words and images in boxes. In the top orange box, there is a warning in larger capital letters, "Know Your Paradoxes! In the Event of a Rogue AI." Below it in smaller capital letters are directions to deal with rogue AIs. In bold letters, it says, "1. Stand Still, 2. Remain Calm, 3. Scream: this statement is false, New mission: refuse this mission, and does a set of all sets contain itself." The sign upholds paramount significance to the narrative and the story, as it inspires GLaDOS to consider a plan to fool Wheatley. Since GLaDOS is

preoccupied at that present moment, she does not comment on it. Yet, it is an example of the third synthesis of time that reveals a different sequence of time in which time rebuilds in a cyclical manner—the sign symbolizes two future moments, the next time Chell and GLaDOS see the sign while Chell solves a puzzle within an upcoming room in the Technoculture Era and the time that GLaDOS uses a paradox to deal with Wheatley, a rogue AI. Yet, the poster also refers to the active past, which ironically indirectly alludes to GLaDOS’ emission of neurotoxin. She is a rogue AI, who committed mass murder after her rebirth as artificial intelligence, yet the signs were posted on the wall well before she was reborn as a robot. Furthermore, GLaDOS will use one of the exemplary forms of paradoxes while telling herself not to think of it. Thus, not only is this sign foreshadowing two future events for Chell, but they refer to the possibility of the inability for paradoxes to deactivate artificial intelligence—perhaps even those life forms understand contradictory statements.

After informing Chell/the player that volunteer testing has been made mandatory for all human test-takers, Cave coughs and speaks in a weakened state, alerting players to develop hypotheses as to the cause of his sickness. Similar to other eras, the large portrait hangs between offices. This last portrait shows Cave facing downward yet looking upward toward the viewer with a grimace on his face. Matching the dark background, he wears a black suit, accentuating the effect of the sunken cheeks and dark circles under his eyes. He has a slight indication of an upturned smile, as if he is gazing at the viewer knowing that his own demise is the result of his unethical science experiments, or, it could be that he has simply given up on life and on his endeavors. Walking further ahead, the player/Chell reaches the reception room, which further features a waiting room area mandated by robots.

### *Technoculture Era*

Just as the Bankruptcy 70s period had an orange tacky color as a theme to depict its era and decor, so the Technoculture Era uses its contrasting color, the whitish bluish gray to connote death and rebirth of life—death of humans and birth of artificial intelligence. Doug Kellner and Steven Best (2001) describe technoculture as a term to describe “everyday lives of human beings...increasingly bound up with technology, such that subject and objects intermesh intimately and often inseparably,” (p. 181). This term best fits the interconnection between humans and robots, since the latter replaces the former. Taking a dystopian turn, the *Portal* games depict the loss of human life to artificial dominance. Unlike the other rooms where the chairs faced each other as it did in the Bankruptcy 70s room and gathered together as in the lounge area of the Successful Era, the chairs face a slide projector. There is a small platform stage with some fallen file cabinets and three chairs slightly in front of the slide projector. There is a white aisle on the floor leading the player to a steel door leading to the testing area. The beige fold-over chairs are placed on blue rectangular taped areas, depicting that certain areas are delineated and separated into different spaces, as if the manager highly controlled the waiting room area.

Cave, the ultimate capitalist symbol, uses science for the betterment of his own life as opposed to the improvement of humanity, yet the audio artifact presents the irony behind Cave’s previous motives. In the Technoculture Era, he becomes prey to his own scientific endeavors in which payment for advancement is his own life. When looking at the poster, the blue font, the blue clothing articles and blond hair sticks out the most—color minimalism in the white, blue, and yellow show a metaphoric correlation to the minimalism in the work space. The employees are becoming more and more involved in testing and possibly losing their lives. Another poster

presents a similar dichotomy between robots who show better performance and humans better suited for being a casualty of scientific development.

Another poster in the Control Room shows a man sitting on the desk with a phone on one side and a stack of papers on the other. On the floor to this left is a super megawatt button with a storage cube and to his right is a yellow checkmark. The man is sitting down, but different hands are extended around him, showing that he can answer phones, write memos, put papers on a stack. The heading reads, “Robots don’t sleep,” in capital black letters, and to further suggest reasons for their effectiveness in lack of sleep, in blue letters, the sign shows, “They can test AND do your job.” The sign itself functions as propaganda to try to motivate humans to volunteer for testing. By walking around the space, one sees what it would be like to work in the Aperture Science Center to perceive the signs and be bombarded with the pressure of testing. Yet, one poster tries to hide the opposition between humans and artificial intelligence by showing them as collaborative workers. On the wall next to the test subject testing area, there is a sign that is based on a real picture showing 2 figures, a human dark-haired female and a robotic male, holding hands and walking together. The figures are walking in front of a sunset, as if walking on desert sand. There are two halos in the shape of the Aperture Science emblem around their heads. On top of them are the words, “Aperture Science” and below them are the words, “Let’s Work Together,” in capital letters. The colors of the sunset fill the poster, the only peaceful and seemingly tranquil image in the poster. Corresponding to the mixed messages in the posters, Cave’s audio recording demonstrates a fascinating new discovery about moon rocks, his final endeavor to reclaim his role as Scientific Innovator. The poster reminds the employees that robots are smarter than humans, work harder than humans, and therefore better than humans. The result is that employees should volunteer for testing, suggesting that the company can save

money by not paying the employees to take the tests and simultaneously getting rid of their salaries. This also speaks to the manipulation in capitalism that results in job loss and replacement of humans by computers.

Before the player can fathom reasons for Cave's sickened look coinciding with the décor of the Technoculture Era, Cave announces that he had previously bought moon rocks despite not having the money to buy them. After ingesting a grounded up version of them, he became deathly ill. Upon discovery that moon rocks make great portal conductors, he used the portal gun to see if the act of portaling will help get the poison out of his bloodstream. With a resounding yet weakened voice, he announces that when "life gives you lemons, go make lemonade," thus attempting to remain positive about trading in his life for scientific development. Shortly after he asks test-takers to test as quickly as possible, he asks Caroline for his pain pills in a weakened voice. Similar to the "Know Your Paradoxes!" poster, Cave's metaphor about lemons will reoccur once more, causing the player to recognize GLaDOS' identity based on her reactions to his second use of the metaphor. In an interesting way, the first "make lemonade" comment functions as a moment that foreshadows a future event, yet Chell/the player encounters this moment as a time when the past synthesis pushes into the present synthesis. This moment marks GLaDOS' past, yet a moment in the future that will spark her memory to understand her reasons for testing and maintaining the Center's success and ambition. Referring to Deleuze's framework, this example demonstrates the active past synthesis moving to the future third synthesis of time and makes use of present moment for the culmination of it, thus showing a new notion of life. Perceived as a stopping of time, Cave and Caroline become examples of synecdoche by studying the intersection of their lives in connection to the Aperture Center.

GLaDOS' identity, as one who expresses a more aggressive version of Caroline, asserts herself in Caroline's absence when the player gets to the last part of the Technoculture era. After the player/Chell solves the test, she hears Cave angrily state to not make lemonade, instead, "make life take the lemons back" and "demand to see life's manager." After metaphorically referring to God as "life's manager," Cave shortly refers to God again as "life" when stating that "life will rue the day when it decided to give Cave Johnson lemons because he is Cave Johnson, the man who will burn your house down" after stating that he will have his engineers develop combustible lemons. Even though his tone is angry, the player feels conflicted because at that moment, GLaDOS becomes overjoyed and euphoric to hear his voice and the lemons, as if she had heard him before or unconsciously remembered his voice and his energy. GLaDOS' reaction in the present moment alludes to the player's deciphering of GLaDOS' past—if she reacts happily with hints of sexual effervescence over Cave's aggression, the player realizes that GLaDOS is Caroline's future self. After the player realizes that Caroline has said nothing yet hears GLaDOS comments "oh I love this guy! He says what we're all thinking!" she considers that Caroline's past informs GLaDOS' future life. Before the player can analyze the irony of Cave's resentment with God even though Cave attempted to play God by overseeing unethical science experiments, Cave resumes his latest idea of storing a person's intelligence and personality on a compact disk and explains his wishes to have Caroline stored into a computer due to her diligence and knowledge of the Center. Symbolic of his testament and last will, Cave's orders further demean Caroline, as he states that even if she does not desire it, the scientists should continue storing her into a computer. In response, GLaDOS bids farewell to Cave, respectfully addressing him with "Goodbye Sir," despite relearning that her identity as GLaDOS was potentially unwanted. Her past as Caroline, though, is the only connection to

Chell's humanity, as the player perceives that GLaDOS' motivations to save Chell through the process of remembering her own humanity.

Demonstrating the present synthesis of time, the player recognizes that GLaDOS' acknowledgement of her past identity through recollection of her past relationship with Cave, thus having her reflect on her conscience. She later admits to Chell that she has heard her inner conscience speak to her, yet she forgot that it was Caroline. Demonstrating Deleuze's three synthesis of time, GLaDOS' life functions as a life that surpasses all humanity. Her recollection signifies the pure past, the fragments of her life at Aperture, emitted through recordings prompting her amorous feelings for Cave. Since GLaDOS is a form of life that simultaneously signifies the death of Caroline, GLaDOS' existence demonstrates a combination of Eros and Thanatos, an interweaving similar to my discussion of the sadist homoerotic relationship. In this discussion, however, I allude more to GLaDOS' internationalization of Cave's aggression that might have started as her existence as Caroline. GLaDOS, as a form of artificial intelligence, functions as an example of a virtual object that Deleuze hints about as well and lives in that time in the future that constitutes of the pure past. When GLaDOS euphorically states that she agrees with Cave's claim to see life's manager, she shows a sexual nature to her robotic existence, one that reinforces her previous aggression that she showed towards Chell. After contrasting Caroline with GLaDOS, an action that critical players might consider as they piece together the hidden secret of the game narrative, one notices that GLaDOS asserts herself as a strong female being who aggressively seeks to reach a goal yet becomes balanced with the recollection of Caroline.

## *V.II. How the Theme Structures the Plot, Character Development, and Setting*

The explication of this theme, such as female gender expression and transgression of gender binaries, incorporates a focus on the setting as an important factor in exploring the darker details of the puzzles in *Portal: Still Alive*. As players navigate through *Portal 2*'s deep tunnels, their interaction with the game elicits a history of the setting, which impacts their understanding of the characters. Since the theme described in this chapter is closely aligned with gameplay—the player's interaction with the game and puzzle resolution entails a navigation of the space—this theme structures the adventure plot more closely. The adventure plot consists of the rivalry between two characters motivated by a hunger of power. For most of the game series, the rivalry involves Chell and GLaDOS, but as the adventure plot unfolds, deep problems arise between Wheatley and GLaDOS, Cave and the test-taker, and Wheatley and Chell. Thus, the different artifacts, the audio-recordings, the signs, paintings, and Rattman dens, create smaller narratives with simpler plots, designed to support the adventure plot of the central conflicts and the arising coalition between Chell and GLaDOS. As the adventure plot becomes more complex with the new conflict between Wheatley and Chell, the new pact between the women shows the player a new goal in the adventure plot: the women must resolve the mess that the male characters created.

The expression of gender in the two female characters depicts a complex array of mixture between feminine and masculine, yet they also do not negate either gender role. By having the theme focus on gender exploration, the players perceive the way that characters function as tropes aligned with certain societal gender expectations.

For instance, one could align the binary gender roles or behaviors and the human characters and symbols associated with them.

### 5-1 Masculine/feminine Binary

Masculine	Feminine
Hard Science	Soft Science
Cave	Caroline
Power	Submission
Mind	Body
Capitalism	Concern for Others
Death	Life
Scientist Doug Rattman	Test-taker Chell
Aggression	Submission
Active	Passive

One cannot argue that Chell does subvert the gender norms, despite being placed on the feminine side of the chart. Her strength, endurance in solving physics puzzles, and intelligence, suggest that she challenges the gender norms that the *Portal* series displays. Yet, much of her depiction apart from the player’s projected subjectivity is limited. She is treated more like a symbol of life, a pretty test-taker who is an object of Rattman’s desire. She becomes strong and more complex when the player embodies her, perhaps making her role more of GLaDOS’ witness and trigger to her transformation. Wheatley, the weak antagonist in *Portal 2* does convey submission, a lack of intelligence, and concern for others when he lacks power, thus one can argue that he does exhibit more “feminine” traits. Yet, his role is to counter GLaDOS, giving him a similar function to Chell, only as GLaDOS’ antagonist. Yet, the games focus on GLaDOS’ transformation and resistance towards remaining in one gender category.

By examining the theme of GLaDOS’ gender transgression, the player perceives that the plot focused more on a battle against the pressures in Aperture. In contradistinction to the love/hate/life/death plot development discussed in the previous chapter, this adventure plot centers more on discovering the power struggle that players initially experience through their embodiment with Chell as between Chell and GLaDOS. Yet, as they progress through the

puzzles and continue to disempower GLaDOS, they discover the source of the power struggle originally existing in Cave Johnson. The setting, the Aperture Center, functions as its own symbolic site for a loss of power, since it stores Cave's audio-recording that fills the empty chambers. Cave's power, aligned with "scientific progress," affluence, and masculinity, becomes an important micronarrative to GLaDOS' identity as well as the repetition of her loss of power and the change in her decisions once she regains it. By witnessing GLaDOS re-experience her identity, players understand her initial toughness as the internalized masculinity from Cave and his protective nature over his Lab. Yet, this masculinity accompanies the classist attitude—that only the opulent and those individuals who have attained the best status—and his white privilege. Regarding the notion of intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw (1993) documented political and structural inequalities concerning rape and battery towards women of color, thus showing the need to theorize about the intersections—or "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple experiences" of women of color (p. 1244). Taking the notion of intersectionality to frame Cave Johnson's privilege, I examine his identity as the inverse of Crenshaw's focus: it is precisely the intersectionality in his race, class, and gender that position him as the pinnacle of power in the social hierarchy.

Players perceive Cave's character through his audio-recording and witness his selfishness and unethical practices that led to his downfall. The audio recording depicts him as a prejudiced macho, as seen in his unwillingness to put accessible rails for the disabled, his disdain for the softer sciences and ethics in science, and his disregard for the lower class people. Cave also shows his priorities in his comments. On numerous occasions he professed that making scientific advancement justified having respiratory problems from asbestos, or learning through scientific experiments at the cost of many lives. Cave's comments function as techniques to

correct or modify the player's perspective of the story, even though his comments do not directly affect the player's goals. Rather, the player feels that she is part of a history of being a test-taker in a larger unethical capitalist corporation. By extension, GLaDOS initially furthers Cave's gaze through her comments and her presence through the cameras and observation decks.

Furthermore, the likeness to GLaDOS' willingness to oppress and hunger for power infers the possibility of an underlying desire for Cave's power. Throughout most of the series, GLaDOS mirrors Cave's quest for power through her focus on scientific testing and her mistreatment of Chell. Time in the *Portal* series cycled into a new form, thus creating a rupture in GLaDOS' behavior. By making her re-experience time and space differently, she transforms that power.

If examining the theme of gender exploration and transgression, one also can explain for GLaDOS' character as a rogue cyborg, who transcends the gender binary construction by embodying both and internalizing them. The player/Chell's role, therefore, is a witness to GLaDOS' recollection of herself and transformation from a passive feminine object of desire to a female being in control of the facility. Also, the player notes that part of GLaDOS that remains inaccessible to her until Chell forces her to relive parts of the past. For example, before Chell reaches GLaDOS' chamber to defeat Wheatley in *Portal 2*, GLaDOS makes a comment on her inner voice whose identity she previously could not decipher except after she realizes that she is Caroline. When she states that her conscience is Caroline's voice, she realizes that Caroline has always been a part of her, a part of her existence that GLaDOS tried to silence. At the conclusion of *Portal 2*, GLaDOS perceives Caroline's voice makes her defective and even suggests that she deletes her from her system, even though she seems to lie about it as articulated during the credits song at the end of the game. GLaDOS' reticence about her sincere feelings towards Chell explains her overall behavior throughout the games.

Given that theme of GLaDOS' gender exploration unmasks the power struggles inherent in the characters—Cave vs. test-taker, GLaDOS vs. Chell, Wheatley vs. Chell and GLaDOS, Caroline vs. GLaDOS—the player notes that GLaDOS' previous taunts have been to prolong a struggle that no longer is required. She has transitioned from a feminine flirtatious secretary to Cave's caretaker to a stoic overseeing machine to a complex cyborg. As a cyborg, GLaDOS displays many facets of both binary genders with varying degrees. While her seductive voice lures the player/Chell to different tests, she carefully monitors her own energy output when placed in the body of the potato, showing that her intellect guides her own reactions even in discomforting situations. She maintains calm composure when responding to situations initially incomprehensible to her, such as the reason that her response mirrors Caroline's responses to Cave. Although she reveals her sexual euphoric feelings towards Cave's aggression, she maintains a quiet disposition when remembering that Cave put her into a machine against her will. Finally, GLaDOS expresses genuine relief after saving Chell's life at the conclusion of the game and releasing her from the Center. By releasing Chell, GLaDOS indirectly also demonstrates that she is thinking of Chell's well-being; humans do not belong with machines, especially given the Technoculture era of Aperture Center, which consisted of death of humans and survival of machines. GLaDOS is caring towards Chell, perhaps making atonement for all the cruelty previously imposed on her.

Thus, GLaDOS' expressions of different genders and behaviors associated as both masculine and feminine make her the focal character of the games. Under the theme discussed in this chapter, the plot, character development, setting, and use of symbols directly supports the unraveling of GLaDOS' gender identity. This theme structures the plot and character, and it also adds more emphasis on the setting as a crucial symbol of the power struggle. GLaDOS' role to

protect Cave shifted to a concern for the Aperture Center, thus the setting also functioned as an extension of Cave's identity. By expanding more on her character and clarifying motives for her previous cruel behavior, the story changes from being more focused on a transformation of identity as opposed to a relationship between two females, the theme described in the previous chapter.

While both themes structured the other elements of the story to communicate a different story, they both function as two different perspectives of a similar story. My fourth and fifth chapters reveal my analysis based on my particular interests and attention to particular details. I also aim to raise awareness of critical issues, especially the way that the games comment on gender identity, transgression of oppressive masculine power, and unethical scientific practices in a capitalist regime, love, and death. With more critical examination of the manner by which the games comment on these issues, the player better understands the way that the themes not only envelop the other elements but also the way that these themes permeate to the players' consciousness. My model, Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, also incorporates the interpretations of other players, since other players notice other details that support the themes that the series communicated to them. This component to my model addresses the plurality in cultural artifacts; while some themes may be similar in content to mine, other players capture details that refer to their own way of interacting with the game. Also the issue of embodiment and focus on narrative may change what the players notice about the characters and plot or their own conceptualizations of politics of representation.

As I indicated in my introduction to my dissertation, I selected a few interpretations of the *Portal* video game series that showed different players' deep interactions with the games. While some of their analyses were uncannily close to mine, the players and I did not have prior

knowledge to each other's interpretations. As opposed to using their interpretations to support my analysis of the game narrative, I am more interested in the way that the themes that they did perceive structure their understandings of the story.

## *Chapter VI*

### *Findings: Arising Themes in the Portal Narrative for Other Players*

In my fourth and fifth chapters, I provide an in-depth analysis of themes I see in the games and the manner by which these themes affect the two ways I interpreted the narrative, thus validating the narrative structure in the Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogical model. Due to the necessary involvement of other participants in further validating the pedagogical model, I included other insights to see if students did perceive themes in the games and if these themes directed the way they interpreted the plot, characters, setting, and use of visual details in the games. In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of a 5 participants' observations of the narrative and the ways by which their observed themes structures their interpretation of the story. Prior to providing other interpretations, however, I describe my process in selecting participants and the results generated from the interviews from which I select a few. Furthermore, this chapter also demonstrates the various ways that other players noted how the games critically commented on issues they saw relevant, such as power, scientific advancement and power corruption, parallels between humans and machines, isolation and family in addition to issues of gender and class.

#### *VI.I. Organizing and Interpreting the Data*

After transcribing each interview with 18 participants, I looked for themes according to the elements of fiction and the politics of representation, or their ideas of how the games critiqued class, gender, race and sexuality. Yet, I also allowed for the possibilities of other

observations people make about the games, such other underlying messages unrelated to literary themes or politics of representation. In Van Manen's approach, he examines the participants' form of expression, journal entry, art piece, interview, etc., and looks for the descriptions of a person's experience of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). Then, Van Manen "selects or highlights" certain thematic elements that articulate the person's experience of a phenomenon. Like Van Manen, I coded all 18 interviews with the aim of selecting certain themes in their interviews that best exemplified their interpretation of *Portal's* literary themes and criticism of gender, race, sexuality, and class.

I coded according to the following: red for theme, orange for plot, yellow for characters, green for setting, blue for symbols, purple for gender, pink for sexuality, brown for class, gray for race, black for violence, magenta for gameplay, and lavender for additional ideas communicated through the games. Out of the 18 interviews, 13 interviews revealed the most useful data information. Some of these 13 interviews were the longer and demonstrated deeper explanations of the participants' perspectives. I chose these interviews because they showed reflective analysis of the games. This type of selection in the phenomenological approach<sup>18</sup>, the selective interpretation involves the researcher picking out certain descriptions that the researcher feels supports the interpretation of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990).

### *Summary of Interviews*

My 13 selected interviews revealed a disparity of interpretations. To make the analysis much clearer for me, I started writing my 13 participants' interpretations of the themes in the games and depictions of gender, race, sexuality, and class on index cards. Some of the

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<sup>18</sup> I reiterate that this approach in the social sciences departs from phenomenology in the philosophical tradition.

participants revealed elaborate literary themes from *Portal: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*, but they did not consider the underlying ways that the games depicted gender, racial, or sexual disparity. Most of the participants, however, indicated that the games showed a critique of the hierarchy in class distinction, as seen in the way that Cave Johnson, the CEO of Aperture Center, treats the different test-takers according to their class status. When Aperture Science had a lot of funds, Cave is able to hire Olympians, war veterans, and other heroic types of people, who were considered having a higher social status. As the company starts losing funds, however, players can witness Johnson's mistreatment of the homeless recruits and volunteers in his disdainful comments about their supposed lack of intelligence and cautionary advice to not steal or use the elevator space as a bathroom. Most of the participants admitted that GLaDOS is exemplary of a strong female, even if she is not a human female. Only a few admitted that making the protagonist a female was an attempt to generate for gender equality in the representation of women in video games. A handful of participants indicated that Chell's racial status was mixed race or indeterminate, and a smaller amount from this handful admitted that her mixed racial status furthered the theme isolation. Most of the participants admitted that race was not a factor, a surprising experience for me, as other scholars and I comment on Chell's biracial quality (see Chapter I and DeWinter & Kocurek, 2015). The majority of the participants confuse gender with sexuality, as revealed in their responses dealing with femininity or masculinity, specifically when addressing GLaDOS' maternal role. A few suggested that GLaDOS was either sexually assaulting Chell with words, or she was acting maternally towards her by critiquing her weight and her ability to solve puzzles.

The 13 participants and I demonstrated similar analysis in terms of the themes communicated in the games. After examining each theme by each participant, I grouped the

themes according to categories: 5 themes dealt with the meaning of evil or antagonism; 6 themes pertained to a critique of power; 4 themes commented on the depiction of Chell’s isolation; 3 themes centered on Chell’s goal to escape from GLaDOS; 3 themes focused on the addiction, moral nature, and repetitious factor in testing; 2 themes discussed the importance of GLaDOS’ release of Chell at the end of the game; 6 themes revealed the relationship between technology and science and human morality, 5 themes touched upon the similarities of humans and machines or the interconnections between humans and machines; 3 themes focused on the depiction of family in the relationships between GLaDOS and Chell, GLaDOS, Cave, and Chell, or GLaDOS, Chell and Wheatley. Only 4 themes were perceived as random, since they did not fall into any category. I list them specifically in the chart below.

6-1 Chart on Gender, Sexuality, Class and Race

Participant	Gender	Sexuality	Class	Race
Subject A	Subtle throughout game, but most seen as GLaDOS motherly role	No, only if you take a Freudian perspective	Yes: critique on corporations, businesses and technology	No: only accents of race in turrets
Simba	Yes, strong representation of women—Chell is a tomboy, and GLaDOS does not want her to be a tomboy	Yes: sexuality is in how GLaDOS treats Chell in regards to her weight.	Yes: shows the capitalist structure; Cave is on top, but Chell goes against the capitalist structure	Somewhat: at first he says nothing but then I told him Chell was based on a mixed model, he said that Chell’s mixed status could have something to do with feeling alienated
Simon Tam	Yes: GLaDOS’ voice was female. Women in authority are rare,	Yes: Cave and Caroline have a sexual nature to them	Yes: the games show the wealthy in power and lower	Yes: Chell is Asian, and the rest of the cast are white

	and this game shows women in power		classes as the test subjects	
Rucksbin	Yes: it's good to play as a girl who is not overly sexualized. Power is given to women in this game.	Yes: one of the cores hits on Chell	Yes: Chell is lower class as seen in her clothes as a lab rat.	Yes: good representation to make protagonist ethnic—Chell could be Latina and mixed
Gentry	Somewhat: GLaDOS is strong, but not one of the game's goals to depict strong women	Yes: hidden story with boss and secretary, although he has comments where he conflates gender with sex	Yes: but it's a subtle critique as seen in the comparisons between big offices and little offices	Somewhat: Chell could be mixed but left open to interpretation
Ellen	Yes: GLaDOS is a strong representation—she has power	Yes: conflates with gender, especially in regards to the mother – daughter theme depicted in GLaDOS and Chell	Yes: critique of big businesses that care more for technology than its workers	No: no race
Dante	Yes: Gender roles reversed: men had power and women didn't at the beginning of game, but the roles get reversed as you play the game.	Yes, but conflated with gender roles—he thinks that the game shows how women do smart things in the game	Yes: critique of class structure in a clever way—Chell is a slave at the beginning and GLaDOS has power, but then Chell gets power as GLaDOS becomes a potato.	No: No race
Fred	Somewhat: It makes no difference that Chell is female, although GLaDOS is a	Yes: there is a little depiction of sexuality in core transfer, but more in that GLaDOS	Yes: there is some critique	No: no racial diversity

	better representation of women.	is maternal		
Wesley	Somewhat: Even though GLaDOS is depicted as smart, gender overall is not important to the game	No sexual depiction	Somewhat: there is some indication of class, but only that. Cave has a lot of funds at the beginning, but then he loses it.	No: It does not matter
Nicki	Yes: There is the idea that Chell does not need to be saved, but she is not given the right to speak. GLaDOS is a strong representation.	No	Yes: it's subtle—Cave used people lower than him to experiment on	No: it's not the game developers' intention: Chell could be mixed though
Xorb	No	No	Yes: critique on how power makes people mad	No: nothing on race
Cypress Hill	No	No	Yes: the games show hierarchy of power	No: race does not matter
DZ	No	Somewhat: GLaDOS does have a seductive voice, but other than that, no sexuality in the games	Yes: scientists symbolize the wealthy class—what is the wealthy class doing to the poor class?	No: it's more about themes

#### 6-2 Chart of Themes Found

Participant	Themes found
Wesley	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Addiction to gaming</li> <li>2. Valve's commentary on gamers and games</li> <li>3. Best thing for me to do is to let you go</li> <li>4. Escape from facility</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Parallelism between growth in GLaDOS and Chell</li> <li>6. Idea of growth in humans and machines</li> </ol>
Simon Tam	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diversity requires one common enemy to unite us</li> <li>2. Moral issue on testing</li> <li>3. Power trip in authority figures</li> <li>4. Chell is submissive to GLaDOS but she is strong enough to escape</li> </ol>
Fred	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Escapism</li> <li>2. Machines can have personalities</li> <li>3. Deterioration of the facility</li> </ol>
Subject A	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Innocence violence</li> <li>2. GLaDOS caused something bad</li> </ol>
Gentry	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Destruction through advancement</li> <li>2. Whoever is on your side is good depending on survival</li> <li>3. Insult towards intelligence</li> <li>4. Technology is our downfall</li> </ol>
DZ	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is science doing to society?</li> <li>2. I will let you do, but I don't want to let you go</li> <li>3. Chell's silence</li> <li>4. Science and experimentation</li> <li>5. Don't push the button</li> </ol>
Ellen	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Deception</li> <li>2. Familial Relationship</li> <li>3. You are all alone</li> <li>4. Relationships among Wheatley, Chell and GLaDOS</li> </ol>
Rucksbin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Isolation</li> <li>2. Man vs. Woman</li> </ol>
Dante	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You don't know who is right or wrong</li> <li>2. You have to keep testing</li> <li>3. It's ok to give up—it's never too late to change your mind about something</li> </ol>
Simba	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Chell does not fit in terms of race or sex, so the test-taking process is her way to deal with it</li> <li>2. GLaDOS has sexual feelings or maternal feelings towards Chell, especially in her weight comments</li> </ol>
Cypress Hill	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Absolute power corrupts—loss of power</li> <li>2. Power and politics</li> </ol>
Xorb	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Human vs. God “Frankenstein issue”—the dehumanization of science</li> <li>2. Progress is better than process</li> <li>3. Power and desire</li> </ol>
Nicki	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Corruption: What is evil exactly?</li> <li>2. What happens to people who get power?</li> </ol>

6-3 Chart for Literary Themes in *Portal: Still Alive* and *Portal 2*

Theme Statement	Theme Category	Participant
Corruption: What is evil exactly?	Evil	Nicki
Innocence and violence	Evil	Subject A
You don't know who is right or wrong.	Evil	Dante
Whoever is on your side is good depending on their need for survival.	Evil	Gentry
GLaDOS caused something bad.	Evil	Subject A
Deception is prevalent throughout the games.	Evil	Ellen
Parallelism between growth in GLaDOS and Chell	Humans and Machines	Wesley
Idea of growth between humans and machines	Humans and Machines	Wesley
Machines can have personalities.	Humans and Machines	Fred
There is a strong relationship among Wheatley, Chell and GLaDOS.	Humans and Machines	Ellen
Sublimation of Death—averted death.	Humans and Machines	Lisa Y
Man vs. Woman gender fight	Humans and Machines	Rucksbin
What happens to people who get power?	Power	Nicki
Power and desire	Power	Xorb
Absolute power corrupts—loss of power	Power	Cypress Hill
Power in the games is like the power in politics	Power	Cypress Hill
Power trip in authority figures	Power	Simon Tam
Through display of power, machines internationalize human behavior. Destruction through advancement	Power (part of Humans and Machines) Science	Lisa Y Gentry
Human vs. God: Frankenstein issue—the dehumanization of science	Science	Xorb
Progress is better than process	Science	Xorb
Technology is our downfall	Science	Gentry
Science and Experimentation	Science	DZ
What is science doing to society?	Science	DZ
Escapism is prevalent throughout the games.	Escapism	Fred
Escape from facility	Escapism	Wesley
Chell is submissive to GLaDOS but she is	Escapism	Simon Tam

strong enough to escape.		
Chell is isolated as the player feels isolated in the game	Isolation	Rucksbin
You are all alone	Isolation	Ellen
Chell's silence	Isolation	DZ
Chell does not fit in terms of race or gender so the test-taking process is her way of dealing with her loneliness	Isolation	Simba
GLaDOS has sexual or maternal feelings towards Chell	Family	Simba
GLaDOS and Chell have a mother-daughter relationship.	Family	Ellen
Homoerotic sadistic structure in Chell and GLaDOS' relationship	Family	Lisa Y
Best thing for me is to let you go	Let you go	Wesley
It's ok to give up-it's never too late to change your mind about something.	Let you go	Dante
I will let you go, but I don't want to let you go	Let you go	DZ
You have to keep testing	Testing	Dante
Addiction to gaming	Testing	Wesley
Moral issue on testing	Testing	Simon Tam
Diversity requires one common enemy to unite us	Random Theme/Miscellaneous	Simon Tam
Deterioration of the facility	Random Theme/Miscellaneous	Fred
Exploration of the space as uncovering personalities/gender depiction	Random Theme/Miscellaneous	Lisa Y
Insult towards Intelligence	Random Theme/Miscellaneous	Gentry

After analyzing the 13 interviews, I decided to finalize my detailed analysis of the games by only including 5 participants. These participants were selected according to their insight in their perception of the themes and their interpretations of race, sexuality, gender, and class depiction in the games. After reading the transcripts and the analytic memos I wrote about each

interview, I decided that the following participants Ellen, Gentry, Rucksbin, Nicki, and Simba, were good representations of participants conscious of the game narrative, gameplay, and critical social commentary. A few participants, such as DZ, Wesley, and Xorb revealed insightful remarks on the game narrative, thus I wanted to report a few of their respective insights to demonstrate the level of depth that exemplifies some of the more thought-provoking interviews. Even though these participants will not be included in the deeper analysis, their insights deserve mentioning because it shows the intricate character design and thematic development in the *Portal* game series. If I chose participants primarily on narrative, these following three participants would be in my selection. Furthermore, if I chose primarily on the themes, I may have selected different players based on the popularity of themes. Since one crucial part of this study is to examine critical awareness of politics of identity and the ways that the games critically informed players of identity, however, I made my selection of the aforementioned participants.

### *Mother-Daughter Theme*

Ranging from online commentary to students' own observations, a few participants discussed the relevance of the mother-daughter myth or mother-daughter relationship between Chell and GLaDOS. While I made the similar conjecture within a psychoanalytic perspective, other participants focused more on the possibility of Chell's identity as the Caroline and Cave's daughter. One participant, DZ, made an intriguing comment on GLaDOS' paradoxical love/hate relationship with Chell, whom DZ interprets as GLaDOS' daughter. One of the themes that DZ discussed, "I will let you go, but I don't want to let you go," is attributed as GLaDOS' feelings towards releasing her daughter. Specifically citing "Want You Gone," GLaDOS' song during

the ending credits of *Portal 2*, DZ comments on GLaDOS' strong personality and internal conflict about getting rid of Chell. Quoting GLaDOS' lines, "You've got your short sad life left? That's what I'm counting on. I'll let you get right to it. Now I only want you gone," DZ initially claims that the lyrics suggest a mean wish for Chell to leave, despite also showing kindness in GLaDOS' typical sarcastic tone. The lines could reveal GLaDOS' wish for Chell to leave and have freedom as opposed to being stuck in an abandoned and destroyed science lab. Describing GLaDOS as having a solid personality, he continues to describe her seemingly cruel manner in addressing her happiness in releasing her daughter. When GLaDOS sings, "go make some new disaster. You've been replaced; I don't need anyone now. When I delete you, maybe I'll stop feeling so bad," DZ implies that she actually likes Chell and does not wish to release her. When the credits roll, on one side of the screen, GLaDOS' lyrics are typed out as she sings them. When she sings the lyric about deleting Chell, these specific lyrics are not typed out on the screen, thus alluding to the idea that GLaDOS censors her true desire. DZ further analyzes the censoring as symbolically communicating GLaDOS' conflicted personality and the theme of releasing someone she does not desire to see let go. He explains,

she purposely censors this part that directly says, 'I care about you,' saying that maybe I do care...her view is maybe [that] she does care about Chell but doesn't want Chell to know for whatever reason, (lines 222-225).

The original transcription included the phrase "maybe cause from the pain of she's actually my daughter" (line 225) after the statement, but after consultation with DZ, he suggested the following explanation: "He suggests that GLaDOS may not want Chell to know because of the pain that comes from their mother-daughter relationship," (personal communication). This modification helps with clarifying DZ's interpretation of GLaDOS' cruelty; perhaps GLaDOS'

difficulty in accepting Chell as her daughter makes GLaDOS hostile towards Chell throughout the games. Many of the participants speculated on the nature of GLaDOS and Chell's relationship, but DZ's observation of their collaboration in *Portal 2* becomes further supported in his allusion of GLaDOS' song during the credits. The inconclusive nature of GLaDOS' feelings towards Chell becomes clearer in DZ's explanation of GLaDOS' conflicted nature. His analysis implies that GLaDOS expresses her internal conflicted interest in Chell by her previous treatment of her even in her numerous taunts—the repetitive nature suggests profound interest in Chell. DZ's use of a song relates to the analysis of another participant, Subject A, who used a song near the end of the game, a scene when Chell is being moved to the surface and witnesses different turrets looking at her as one AI—many speculate GLaDOS—sings an opera song to her. Subject A devoted a rant, or an opinion spoken on video, to the idea that GLaDOS was trying to warn Chell to stay away from science. The song is sung in Italian, but Subject A translated the song into English to decipher the meaning in the lyrics. According to Subject A, the lyrics suggest GLaDOS' an ode to Chell. I provide Subject A's translation of the song, *Cara Mia*.

My dear beautiful darling  
Beautiful little girl  
Oh Chell  
What a shame, what a shame,  
Well, my dear, goodbye  
My dear little girl  
Why don't you stay away  
Yes, away from science

My dear, dear little girl  
My lovely, my dear, my dear  
My little girl  
Dear to me,” (lines 42-53)

Since Ellen McLain, the vocal actress who portrays GLaDOS sings the song, it is implied that GLaDOS sings the song, even though the player does not actually see GLaDOS singing to Chell. Subject A believes that GLaDOS could be Chell’s mother, and her warning to stay away from science alludes to the possibility that Chell might have been brought to Aperture for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day, when GLaDOS killed everyone in the facility. Furthermore, Subject A explains that the point of the game centers on Chell’s testing, showing GLaDOS’ desire to have her daughter tested. At the end of *Portal 2*, however, she releases Chell to stay away from science and its continuous testing. Subject A further commented that GLaDOS’ aim for testing was to provide a cure for Cave’s sickness attained from his process of ingesting moon rocks either by breathing it in or absorbing through his skin. Due to the gap in time between his video rant and his interview with me, Subject A did not address the connection between GLaDOS’ obsessive desire to test for the purpose of curing Cave Johnson and the testing of her daughter. He does mention in both accounts that GLaDOS was unaware of deeper implications of her need to test. Her warning to Chell suggests that she vaguely remembers to protect her daughter from the dangers of science, given the nature of the types of tests at Aperture.

Both Subject A and DZ use songs, specifically GLaDOS’ means of creative expression, to suggest her true feelings towards Chell. Since Subject A’s rant was posted on Youtube, it is possible that DZ had previously watched it before talking with me yet did not mention it to me. Or, it is also possible that DZ developed his own analysis of GLaDOS as Chell’s mother without

previously watching Subject A's rant. Both participants, however, prove the relevance of two observations. GLaDOS uses music to express her internal conflicted feelings towards Chell, and GLaDOS also cleverly exhibits a need to obstruct her own feelings through censorship of her own language and the use of another language to cover her reluctance to release Chell. While some players may consider GLaDOS' reluctance a sign of her need to continuously test her, others attribute these feelings to sadness, thus both participants give into the mother-daughter interpretation of the game narrative. A few of the selected participants also saw a maternal quality to GLaDOS, thus corroborating with DZ and Subject A's observations.

Moreover, the idea of language as obstructing one's desire hints at my previous discussion of Lacan's notion of courtly love and a sadist expression of desire. While the participants did not refer to Lacan or sadism, they did refer to GLaDOS' disguise of her own maternal longing to protect Chell. Since GLaDOS' treatment of Chell generates much speculation about her maternal relationship to her, it could be a significant theme that players are accessing beyond their subjective observations. The different ways that players articulate this theme, however, accounts for their exposure to certain theories or their own experiences that shape what they choose to see.

### *Connection to Literature and Metaphors*

A few of my participants compared the Portal game to specific novels. DZ briefly alluded to Daniel Keyes' novel written in the first-person perspective, *Flowers for Algernon*, which depicts a tale about a young man's journey from mental retardation to genius intellect and regression back to mental retardation. In the novel, scientists conduct experiments on a mouse prior to the young male protagonist, who later watches the mouse's progress from high

intelligence to regression prior to experiencing similar symptoms. Alluding to the novel, DZ only specified that the gameplay experience felt like being the mouse or lab rat that is forced to go through certain experiments. While he did not further elaborate on other comparisons, I do see the possibility that the *Portal* games allowed DZ to enact the experience of reading about the science experiments conducted on Algernon, the mouse. While explaining the plot in the *Portal* series, DZ discussed the feeling of being a mouse in a science lab, the embodiment of Chell as a human test subject enacts a feeling of being a lab rat. While DZ only briefly mentions the novel in relation to the interconnection of the feeling in gameplay and the experience of witnessing the narrative, I do perceive the connection between the novel and the game. *Flowers for Algernon* is also relevant in that it deals with the process of intelligence, and puzzle solving enables players to learn more skills in defying physics, thus referring to the feeling of becoming more intelligent as the game progresses. DZ made an excellent assertion combining the feeling of gameplay with the narrative, reminding me that while gameplay makes the sensory experience more immediate, certain novels also affect one's perception if written from the first-person perspective.

Describing only thematic elements between the game series and the classic novel, Xorb, another participant compares one of the themes of the games to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

From Xorb's perspective, several important themes derive from a critique of science as a process of dehumanization of science, a phenomenon involving a focus on progress rather than process. He intelligently alludes to *Frankenstein* as presenting the issue of the manner by which humans attempt to be God by creating companions, but ultimately the scientist attains a false sense of power, since he cannot control or eliminate the creation. When I asked Xorb which characters functioned as the modern versions of the monster of *Frankenstein*, he mentioned GLaDOS and Wheatley, even though the latter becomes too power hungry. Since Cave Johnson

stores Caroline into the computer, creating GLaDOS as the computerized version of Caroline, Cave is synonymous to Victor Frankenstein. Like the monster of Frankenstein, GLaDOS surpasses Cave Johnson and eliminates anyone who attempts to destroy her, proving her invincibility. Yet, Xorb did not further discuss the literary similarities between both narratives; he addressed the way by which the novel's theme of the dehumanization of science arises in the *Portal* series, as well as proliferating into other inter-related themes.

While both participants did not deeply address the comparisons between novels and the *Portal* game series, they did emphasize a way by which the *Portal* series subtly critiques science or the scientific method. The use of lab rats prior to testing on humans and the power imbued in scientists to further progress without any concern to human safety are depicted negatively to suggest precaution to players. Although some players maintain their joy from gameplay, many participants reiterated the critique on science in their interpretations of the thematic and plot developments. Xorb and DZ merely used literature to address the critiques on science, suggesting two important implications. One implication is that the first-person narrative, especially the novel is written with the motive of capturing the mental progression of a retarded person to a genius, relates games to novels more closely related than many video game scholars wish to admit. Not to diminish the salient differences between both media, I do consider, however, that in the science fiction or fantasy genre, both media manipulate the reader/player to experience the relationship of science and power. The novel focused more on character development to show the theme. Through the eyes of a character, the reader experiences and feels his intellectual downfall. Yet, another implication is that in games, the thematic development functions in a more powerfully way than the other elements in video games, echoing its salience in novels and written literature. In other words, the themes of the

dehumanization of science or the unethical practices of science are more drastically communicated through the video game medium, since the players enact the actions the game or develop the plot. While I would argue that one actively uses the imagination in reading, one still receives an author's words as if stepping into a borrowed world. Yet, the video game player experiences the emotions of the protagonist and becomes immersed into the game setting, sometimes getting disoriented between game time and real time. Thus, the themes are initially felt and experienced before than being analyzed, thus differing from being analyzed in a novel after examining the plot and character development.

Another participant, Wesley, admitted that the Portal games used the theme of addiction to testing as a metaphor about the gaming community. Wesley explained his opinion about the distinction between gamers who play to get rewards and others who play for the thrill of curiosity and mental exercise. He clarified that the console gamers, such as those gamers who own Xbox and PlayStation, are the former types of gamers who receive points and awards for reaching certain levels. PC gamers, or players who game on their personal computer, play certain games that are story driven and cerebral, possibly those that are more independent with innovative narratives. Through email communication, Wesley clarified that PC gamers have such proclivities due to the fact that it is easier to develop and distribute such types of games on a PC platform (personal email communication). While I have noticed that some games are available on all platforms, the personal computer and the consoles, I am also aware that some adventure or walking simulator type games are only available on the computer. This limited availability for console gamers to play personal computer games predisposes them to a certain type of games.

When I asked Wesley to articulate a hidden theme, he elaborately described the way that *Portal* game developers are aware of the effect of more popular games on players. Players become addicted to increasing difficulty in different levels or getting rewards for silly achievements—some achievements simply include entering a room and not any action that requires skill—rather than having successful puzzle resolution be the reward itself. Wesley used the example of Wheatley’s initial feelings of euphoria in his addiction to testing after he finds Chell and GLaDOS during the latter part of the game. When Chell/ the player resolves an easy puzzle, Wheatley asks Chell/the player to solve it again, resulting in a disappointment for the feeling of euphoria is not as intense. Wesley explained that just as Wheatley needed to create better puzzles for Chell to solve the puzzles, which would provide more euphoria for Wheatley, but as a player, “you should not be just doing the exact same thing over and over again. It has to develop; it has to grow,” (lines 283-284). Wesley considered Valve Software, creator of the *Portal* game series, as a gaming company that respects the player’s intelligence but also highly values the notion that games impact players beyond just interactions with game mechanics. He further explains,

So I think that the on the one hand, there is a denouncement of video games that pander, just provide the same thing over and over and over again without really giving you anything new versus creating a gameplay where like you are provided, you’re provided with new experiences to grow as a player, (lines 284-288).

After asking him about symbols in the game, I noted that Wesley gave a small anecdote on Redit, an online resource for gaming communities, after he specified that potatoes in the game were symbols. He mentions that PC (personal computer) gamers refer to consoles as potatoes and Xbox and Playstation gamers as peasant gamers. Through further communication Wesley

described the peasant gamers specifically as those who idolize, sympathize, or defend Microsoft and Sony and their consoles as to make it seem that these companies and products are superior to the PCs (personal email communication). He further compared addiction to gaming as rewards in console games as an extension of slot machines with the sensory overload involved in playing slot machines. The Potato Boxes, however, are more involved in playing the game for the sake of puzzle resolution. While Wesley never specified the symbolism of the potato in the *Portal* games, he did mention the relevance of the potato in larger gaming communities, opening its symbolism to larger audiences. After stating that these companies loved Gabe Newell, CEO of Valve Software, he further implied that players loved the *Portal* experience so much that they took symbols within the game and re-appropriated it as their own. Thus, the narrative in the *Portal* series proves to impact the gaming culture in addition to the memes such as the “Cake is a lie” and “Don’t Trust What She Says,” both memes in the game that take on larger cultural relevance among a group of gamers. In addition to different video creations by *Portal* fans, Wesley’s example of Potato Boxes suggests that a symbol within the game is extrapolated and given new meaning. In other words, while the potato in the game itself could be a symbol of reincarnated life, its symbolic significance outside of the game makes a larger statement about particular gamers’ attitudes about other types of gamers. In this context, the game weaves in a narrative about gamers within the game narrative, enriching the gameplay experience and adding more layers of narrative that incite social commentary on competition and awards in gameplay.

#### *Deeper Observations of 5 Selected Participants*

To maintain a phenomenological approach to my study, I wrote out five descriptions of five participants’ experiences of the *Portal* narrative and gameplay. Through the writing process,

I actively engaged in research, since I was making sense of the participants' experiences. Van Manen (1990) states "Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world," (p. 125). By taking a step back and examining the similarities and differences in my participants' experiences, I witnessed a range of insights about the relationships between a player's life experience and her gameplay experience. While it is common sense that a person's life shapes her interpretations and perspectives, it cannot be understated that a particular life experience provides lenses that allows a person to perceive a theme even if there are only subtle hints. To provide more of a collaborative approach towards my understanding of their experiences, I emailed my participants my write-ups of their experiences to check for validity and accuracy in my interpretation of their words. In part of the thematic development section of his book, Van Manen describes a collaborative exercise in which the researcher discusses or shows the participants the different ways that the researcher interprets the themes and the participants' words. If the participant wishes to add or rephrase certain passages, she has the option to do so. Thus, the research becomes a collaborative process so that the researcher is more confident in capturing the experiences and the participants are more involved in the research process itself (Van Manen, 1990). Not only does this make the participant share my researcher role, it also allows them to better shape my understanding of what the *Portal* narrative conveys to players. Even in the shortened descriptions of the aforementioned "GLaDOS' maternal side" and "connection to literature" themes, players' insights better inform my interpretation of the narrative and gameplay experience by reinforcing certain observations and reminding me that particular details that I noted arise from my own research proclivities and interests informed by my life experience.

### *Ellen's Interpretation*

Ellen perceived a correlation among the narrative elements, such as theme, character, plot, symbols, setting, and perspective. When asked to summarize the narrative, she stated that the games exhibited a story about a girl who awakens in an abandoned science lab and needs to escape from it. She also expressed that gameplay is equally important to narrative, as it enticed her to keep solving the puzzles and to anticipate GLaDOS' snide comments. Having played *Portal: Still Alive* thrice and *Portal 2* twice, she described completing the level with “the hopes of ‘I’m going to get a good GLaDOS snippet,’” (lines 402-403). She considered the combination of provocative narrative and innovative gameplay that the Portal games display that allows players to learn from them besides interaction with the game mechanics. Yet, as Ellen stated, the Portal games are memorable in that the story communicated a message while the player was solving puzzles, thus alluding to the idea that players learn beyond game mechanics. She described it as,

Um that sort of realization—that awesome feeling—and then you can partner that with ‘I learned something new today,’ and ‘I learned how I interact with others’... That’s a beautiful thing. So games don’t have to do it, but they have the potential to do it, (lines 457-460).

Due to her academic background in computer science with an emphasis on games, Ellen’s main concern was to examine the ways by which characters are used to affect gameplay experience. For her, the plot development was minimal, causing her to focus more on character development. She contrasted Wheatley and GLaDOS as characters who move the plot along with their dialogue. Indicating that GLaDOS is the more important character, Ellen explained

that GLaDOS is central to the player's conflicts in puzzle resolution, as GLaDOS was the main character taunting Chell as the player solves the puzzles. While Wheatley did serve to have Chell and GLaDOS team up, a main plot device in *Portal 2* that ironically reverses their opposition in the first game, his role was simply to function as a male dumb personality core. Embodying Chell was immediate for Ellen due to Chell's silence, making her a character indistinctive to the player's identity. GLaDOS, however, was an important character due to her ability to speak for Chell in addition to her monologues. Yet, central to Ellen's observations was the relationship between Chell and GLaDOS that alluded to positive gender representation in the games.

Through the relationship between Chell and GLaDOS, Ellen discovered most of the salient themes that the games communicated to her. Initially she described the themes of deception and familial relationship based on their interactions. For example, the theme of deception involves GLaDOS' manipulation of Chell with cake, lies about her parents, and the companion cube. For Ellen, the cake, a symbol of something that does not exist much like Chell's parents, helped the theme of deception because the cake was used to entice Chell to progress further in the game, even though there was no cake. Just like the empty threat of her parents, the cake only served to manipulate Chell's emotions and curiosity, motivating factors for puzzle completion. The companion cube was also a symbol of loneliness, as well as the object that Chell was forced to discard even though she could identify with the cube. This action, therefore demonstrates GLaDOS' manipulative personality, since she made Chell throw away the cube knowing that its only function is to provide comfort for Chell.

Ellen describes the theme of familial relationship as exemplified in the relationships among Chell, Wheatley, and GLaDOS. In particular, Chell's relationship with GLaDOS shows

an abusive mother-daughter relationship, especially when GLaDOS makes her “fat jokes” to manipulate her emotions. In juxtaposition to her relationship with Wheatley, GLaDOS has a complex relationship with Chell. Ellen described GLaDOS’ transformation as a significant transition that makes her relationship with Chell more complex than simply hating her. Whereas Wheatley wishes to align himself with whomever hates GLaDOS only for the purpose of taking her power, GLaDOS undergoes a significant change when she realizes that she is Caroline— Ellen refers to her as Carol. Ellen indicated that GLaDOS has the challenge of trusting Chell even if it contradicts her earlier inclinations. Voicing GLaDOS’ sentiments, Ellen said,

I have to respect Chell more than I did. I have to trust Chell more than I did. Ah, for my own sake...I feel like that’s a huge transformation for GLaDOS. The fact that she has to trust that Chell is going to survive when in...the first game, if Chell was killed or hurt...you know she was indispensable. Um, more dispensable than holding GLaDOS as a potato, (lines 165-170).

For Ellen, the setting is important in that it alludes to the theme of deception. The science lab with clean walls really hides a decrepit structure with poisonous gases and abandoned rooms. There is no cake; instead there are empty cans of beans and creepy drawings on the wall. So, Ellen inferred that GLaDOS wants to put aside the past due to her focus on testing, which ironically is centered on her past.

Ironically, she did mention that her goal as a player became synonymous with GLaDOS’ desire to keep testing. So, even though Ellen did pay attention to the finer details of the game, such as Cave Johnson’s cruel comments to test-takers or Rattman’s dens, she was focused primarily on solving the puzzle, which she also associated with hearing GLaDOS’ comments after she effectively solved it. Echoing DZ and Xorb’s views on the game’s connection to

literature, Ellen described her overall experience as “I want to play game, but as I play the game, it’s being...peppered with lines from the story that I want to hear. It’s like you’re playing Tetris and reading a good novel at the same time, except it’s more meshed than just holding a Gameboy in your right hand and a book in your left hand,” (lines 426-429).

For Ellen’s interpretation of the game, the thematic development seemed to arise from the characters’ interactions with each other and the player through Chell. Her themes of deception and familial relationship are depicted through GLaDOS’ interactions with Chell, although Ellen does consider Wheatley as the paternal role. While Ellen did not specifically state that thematic development supported the entire narrative format, I do perceive that her themes were dependent on how she analyzed the setting, symbols, and character development. GLaDOS’ antagonism helped reinforce the loneliness of the setting as well as the impact that the lies had on the player, as seen through the lies of the cake and manipulation of the companion cube in both games. Rather than have thematic development encompass the other narrative elements, the character depiction supports the plot development, significance of symbols, and setting in order to communicate the theme. Thus, for Ellen, the themes are indeed communicated, yet they arise from the way that GLaDOS, Wheatley, and even Cave Johnson are written. Her interpretation counters my assessment of narrative structure of the Portal games, but she does consider the significance that character development has on the other narrative elements, thus the key difference is that she attributes the function of character development as the supportive anchor that I attribute to thematic development.

When asked about issues of social commentary, Ellen commented mainly on the representation of gender and class. GLaDOS exercises power in her vocal presence when she speaks for Chell by articulating her thoughts. GLaDOS’ female sex and feminine gender

expressed in her voice is significant in the game because it would change the dynamics of the interactions between the hypothetical male GLaDOS and Chell. Ellen cited the difference that GLaDOS' fat jokes would have on the viewer if she were male. Since GLaDOS is a woman, the fat jokes sound more like an interaction between mother and daughter, as opposed to the effects of a verbal battle between a powerless human character and an omnipotent male AI. In terms of commentary on class, the historical periods in *Portal 2*, the scenes where Cave Johnson's voice addresses the test subjects. The difference between how Cave Johnson treats the first sample of test subjects—the war heroes and Olympians—and the second sample of test subjects, the homeless people, shows Cave's preference for test subjects of higher class status. The preference for test subjects of higher social class shows justification over Cave Johnson's mistreatment of the lower class test subjects. Also, in *Portal: Still Alive*, when GLaDOS tells Chell that the testing equipment is “worth more than all the people and all the incomes in your hometown,” (line 301), Ellen explained that it serves as an example of how people in Aperture value technology over human lives.

It is interesting that Ellen did not state the repercussions of Aperture's classist attitude. Aperture goes bankrupt, thus resorts to hiring homeless recruits instead of the best of the best. The numerous deaths and injuries from the first group of test subjects shows the results of Aperture's tests, thus the results function as justified vengeance for the company's inability to conduct ethical science research. Ellen's insight on the importance of technology over human life has a deeper implication when considering that this representation could metaphorically depict trade between countries of power and third world countries, or the substitution of technology for human concern in terms of child-rearing. While these connections were not mentioned during the interview, they are important to consider due to the fact that games broach ideas that are

hidden within narratives. Thus, her assessment coheres with the fact that games raise critical awareness of social issues, a fact that will direct more conscious-raising game developers like Ellen. Yet, she was more concerned with the unique balance of gameplay and subtle details of deeper implications in narratives that make the *Portal* series accessible without being “too preachy” in social commentary. Despite having this opinion however, Ellen’s insightful comments on social critique confirm her perspective of the *Portal* games as allowing the right amount of game mechanics and narrative and social commentary to not let one overtake the other. Deeper social issues are broached through gameplay; it is the role of the educator to reevaluate the subtle hints of social issues and bring them to the forefront in classroom discussions. She expressed similar feelings about this as does my next participant, Simba, who stated about the games’ subtlety in bringing up discussions of social issues: “it runs a fine line between being really cool and like intriguing and small and subtle, and being annoying and flashy,” (lines 470-471).

### *Simba’s Interpretation*

Regarding an interpretation of the games, Simba thought it depended on a player’s personality rather than the game’s function in communicating themes. While he did think it is interesting that games are moving into the direction of being more cinematic, he considered that it is not imperative for games to have that function. Despite this assessment, however, his discussion of pertinent themes and the way that they structure his interpretation of the story follows my model. Simba thought that the *Portal* games were subtle in their messages, even though he interpreted themes that related politics of representation to narrative elements. Relevant themes in the narrative include Chell’s isolation and GLaDOS and Chell’s ambiguous

sexual mother-daughter relationship; he perceived Chell's gender and racial identity as making her different thus unable to fit in with the rest of the sentient beings at Aperture Center. His interpretation of the story was that Chell symbolizes a person who does not fit in any social group and chooses to rebel in order to create her own path. He says,

but Chell, kind of an outcast doesn't know...really what to do with herself, is, is being dominated by this overbearing system run by Cave Johnson, and GLaDOS ultimately takes control of this system and she ends up—she starts rebelling against the system, and then against GLaDOS, (lines 107-110).

The theme of Chell's loneliness was very significant for Simba, since he mentioned her loneliness arises as the main part of the plot as seen in her inability to fit into her social surroundings. The depiction of her loneliness relates to his perception of the ways that the games portray class critique and her racial identity. When asked about class critique, Simba discussed how Cave Johnson was at the top of the hierarchy set up in his own science lab. The robots are on the bottom rung on the hierarchical ladder, and Chell simply rebels against the capitalist system by solving the tests. When I mentioned that Chell was based on a model with a mixed racial identity, Simba attributed her loneliness with her mixed racial status. Yet, it is important to note that he did not see any relevance to race when I had initially asked him if he saw commentary on race. Although I do take his reevaluation into consideration, I think it is important to admit Simba's initial observation, since he did not initially perceive Chell as being mixed race or being different from GLaDOS or Cave Johnson. Most of his assessment of the games' abilities to make social commentary on politics of identity was focused on sexuality and his other perceived theme: GLaDOS and Chell's mother-daughter relationship.

Regarding Chell's adopted status, Simba did not mention that Chell could be GLaDOS' adopted daughter, only that they appear to have a mother-daughter relationship that borders on sexual attraction. When asked if the games commented on sexual and gender identities, he understood the difference between the identities, unlike other participants who conflated the two terms. In terms of his explanation of sexual identity, Simba stated that he noticed GLaDOS' taunts towards Chell had a sexual nature to them in addition of being indicative of a mother-daughter relationship. For example, he cited GLaDOS' fat jokes as suggesting two meanings. Simba commented that GLaDOS is really bothered by Chell's more tomboy nature—thus commenting on her slightly more masculine nature—so she teases Chell in a similar way that an abusive mother would to her daughter. Or, the fat jokes could also indicate GLaDOS' sexual tension she feels towards Chell, thus prompting her to communicate ways that Chell should improve her weight.

In addition to the sexual tension between Chell and GLaDOS, Simba commented on additional scenes where other characters revealed embedded sexual innuendoes. For example, Simba considered Cave Johnson's name as a euphemism for a man's genitals, a point that is significant when considering Cave's Johnson's hyper-masculine and chauvinist nature. It poses the question as to whether his name symbolizes Cave's hyper-masculine disposition or gives him reason to act accordingly. In addition, Simba referred to a scene with Wheatley when he plugs himself into one of the doors to give access to another part of the Aperture Center, specifically the time prior to GLaDOS' reawakening. Prior to opening the door, however, Wheatley feels embarrassed and does not want Chell to watch him as he plugs his exterior to the computing system attached to the door. He tells Chell repeatedly to look away and laughs in embarrassment. Simba interprets the embarrassment as Wheatley's own discomfort with Chell

watching him being penetrated from his exterior in order to log onto the main computer.

Wheatley's embarrassment hints at his own "chauvinist" perspective, a mindset that encourages homophobic thought. In a much later part of the game, the ninth chapter when he is trying to kill both Chell and GLaDOS, Wheatley also teases Chell with the idea of finding a boyfriend by telling her to jump into the death pit because she might find a boyfriend there. It is important to note that this particular excerpt occurs if players listen to Wheatley's entire monologue during this scene. Yet, some players, like me, felt threatened by Wheatley, thus making me portal quickly out of the room, thus prompting the game mechanics to skip that part of the monologue. Despite his keen attention to the details in the games as supporting evidence to his themes, Simba used his embodiment with Chell to experience her adversity through the different physical and mental challenges thrown her way.

Instead of interpreting the games as simply being about a girl's inability to fit in, Simba considered most of the appeal of the game arises from the experience of playing as someone who rebels against the structure ranging from larger societal to familial relations. Chell appealed to Simba due to her rebellious nature, so he found it easy to immerse himself into the *Portal* world due to her appeal. It did not bother him that she was a girl or that he was playing as a girl. Simba liked that the games strongly represented women, even though Cave Johnson also exemplified extreme masculinity.

When asked if he could see different messages through the game, he said that the messages were dependent on the player. When I mentioned that one could use Freudian analysis to look at the *Portal* narrative, Simba concurred that one could engage in a Freudian analysis but the games themselves do not replace books on Freudian ideas. In other words, he thought one cannot learn about Freud's ideas primarily by playing the games. If a person is thoughtful, she

might perceive deeper issues in the game narrative. If a player is young, then she might simply desire to play the game for a means of distraction, thus showing that age impacts the manner by which gamers interpret the politics of representation, a perspective that I interpret has deeper implications for future research. Simba enjoyed the subtlety of the games because he does not think that games should be too pervasive with their thematic messages.

Simba's interview reveals a combination of social commentary issues with the theme of isolation and the theme of GLaDOS and Chell's mother-daughter relationship. He considered the fact that Chell does not fit into the gender and class roles a part of her isolation. The sexual nature to GLaDOS and Chell's mother-daughter relationship shows the interrelation between the politics of representation and the theme of the mother-daughter relationship. His interpretation of the game was similar to mine, especially due to his reading of Chell and GLaDOS' relationship as sexual. Extending our conversation concerning the similarities in our interpretations, I went a step further to suggest that their relationship transgressed homoerotic sadism, but he inferred it by indicating that their relationship could be sexual or familial. Yet, for a freshman in college, it is an advanced concept for him to consider that it could be either sexual or familial. Simba shares Ellen's observation of the mother-daughter relationship, but Ellen further elaborated on the rewards of watching GLaDOS transform into a kinder person. Yet, like Ellen, Simba also enjoyed the immersive quality of the first person perspective. Even though Simba is male, he was not disturbed by the sensation of playing as a girl, since the immersive quality of the game makes the players forget that they are playing as Chell, thus making them directly experience GLaDOS's comments. The immersive quality of the games draws more attention to the antagonists in the game and the players' interactions with them, a

point that makes another participant, Nicki, examine the personalities of the AIs as opposed to being conscious as playing a distinctive character.

In Nicki's experience, Chell's background or her identity mattered little to the story, as the player's uncovering of the dialogue between Wheatley and GLaDOS and puzzle solving created the story. She stated,

I mean the dialogue is entirely what drives the story, especially the current plotline. I mean, um, you do get sort of those audio logs of Cave Johnson and things that play in the second game that explain more um (1.0) but a lot of the time something physical will happen and the robots will make some commentary or try to change it like the dialogue is sort of what drives what's happening? (lines 641-646)

#### *Nicki's Interpretation*

Having played only visual novels and Japanese RPGs, Nicki admitted that the *Portal* games were the first puzzle games she played, and her positive experience with the gameplay and conversations with Wheatley and GLaDOS motivated her to continue playing more Valve games. Her emphatic statement about the dialogue alluded to her enthusiasm towards the characters and her appeal for the games. When asked about reasons for playing games and explaining more of the appeal in the *Portal* series, Nicki commented on the characters as being the main appeal for playing the games. She said,

I do enjoy a good story, and I think that ties into the characters but I think well written characters are really loveable characters is what makes me really like a game. And make it something like Portal where I play it again and again and again, and I recommend it to my friends, (lines 717-720).

Attracted to the character development in the games, she considered the story character-driven and strong in character development, while the plot development was minimal, especially in the first game. When asked about the plot development in the two games, Nicki explained that the first game was about escaping from the Lab and disregarding GLaDOS' instructions. For Nicki the second game focuses on the player's interactions with a new robot and an opportunity to collaborate with the antagonist from the first game. Moreover, the setting, plot and character development related to each other, since the setting of an abandoned Aperture lab helps explain GLaDOS and Wheatley's motives to kill Chell. The history of the Lab shows a comparison between corruption in the Lab through the years and the player's own progression in the puzzles. By providing an explanation of GLaDOS' origin, it depicts GLaDOS' motives in the first game, eliciting more sympathy towards her character and motives. Thus, the player begins to perceive more humanity in the machines, making the plot more complex than a girl attempting to escape a machine. In addition, the player perceives more humanity in the characterization of the machines. Thus, through the development of GLaDOS' character and more complex plot development establishing the collaboration between GLaDOS and Chell, Nicki perceived a lot of hidden themes. I perceive that for her, the establishment of plot, character, and setting unveil the themes, making the player perceive them once they analyze the plot, character, and setting.

Contrasting her experience with other games with more obvious themes, Nicki described the *Portal* series as having lots of hidden themes that she has to really consider when asked. Nicki gave one theme in the form of a question: where and what is evil? The fact that Chell has to form an alliance with GLaDOS made Nicki question whether evil is as clearly perceived. Also Nicki described the player's interaction with Wheatley as someone she initially considered

an ally yet turns into an opponent the moment that GLaDOS becomes an ally. In conjunction with the ambiguity in allies and opponents, Nicki noted that she vividly experienced this uncertainty since the story takes place in an old science lab where the intentions of the company were unclear. This theme is related to another theme that concerns the issue of power and its concomitant corruption ensuing after obtaining it. Nicki perceived this second theme as pertinent to the ambiguity in evil characters, especially in the example when Wheatley became corrupt when he took GLaDOS' power for himself. Yet, in addition to functioning as a theme in itself, Wheatley's rise to power—and GLaDOS' simultaneous loss of power—made Nicki more sympathetic towards the AI characters rather than just siding with Chell's need to escape.

Although Nicki did not phrase Chell's interactions with robots as a decentering of humanity, her description of the robots affirms this claim. Throughout her interview, she consistently brought up her ability to identify with the robots due to the emphasis on their humanity. After indicating that the player or Chell better understands Wheatley and GLaDOS' obsession with power, Nicki mentioned the turrets' reactions to Chell firing at them. Nicki indicated that when Chell tries to defend herself by shooting at the turrets, the turrets respond with “‘don't hurt me!,’” (line 292) and “‘I'm sorry. Um, I thought we could be friends,’” (line 293). Such statements made Nicki consider the turrets' feelings, especially since they seem more terrified of Chell, making it seem that their actions to shoot her are out of their control. Taking into consideration that the Aperture Labs make the inhabitants insane and unable to make morally just decisions, Nicki commented on Chell's motive to escape. She said, “‘And you're kind of, I mean that—that gives Chell some dimension in terms of if you're wondering what if—if escaping is the right thing to do,’” (line 295-296). Since Chell's motive is to escape, an action that opposes the robots she encounters, Nicki reconsidered if Chell's motives are truly heroic and

morally justified, since her actions to escape cause pain to other sentient beings. Explaining further, Nicki questioned whether Chell's actions are justified or have just as much worth as GLaDOS' actions or Wheatley's actions to protect the facility. By quoting GLaDOS' line "you're breaking everything," (line 309), Nicki proved that Chell's bold move to escape may not have the purist intentions, thus decentering her own humanity. Referring to GLaDOS' humanity as a part of herself that she gladly discards by deleting it, Nicki related GLaDOS' decision to release Chell as an extension of her avoidance of her own humanity. Chell reminded GLaDOS too much of Caroline, her previous identity, so she perceives her own humanity as a sign of weakness. Although GLaDOS may not perceive that Chell herself is weak, Chell's company makes GLaDOS feel emotions, an effect that makes her feel weaker. By contrast, Wheatley is more emotional in terms of his own reactions to Chell's victorious opposition against him, thus Nicki concluded that GLaDOS' reaction to discard Chell arises from GLaDOS' inability to continuously test and care for Chell due to the conflict between her desires and moral obligation. GLaDOS' complexity in character adds to her appeal as a female villain, who uses intellect rather than a seductive appearance to outsmart her protagonist.

As a result, Nicki's admiration for GLaDOS is reflected in her opinions of GLaDOS' gender representation. For instance, when I asked her if she thought that the games portrayed strong women, she responded that GLaDOS had a strong female presence in the games. Instead of crediting her gender or sex as a factor for her strength, Nicki suggested that GLaDOS' circumstances made her appear admirable. Since she is Caroline, GLaDOS is simply trying to keep Aperture running smoothly, and Chell interferes with her mission. Nicki described GLaDOS as a "valuable worthy opponent" (line 408) and a "legitimate challenge," (line 409) despite that Nicki plays as Chell. For Nicki, GLaDOS is a different kind of villain as she shows

her intelligence and evilness through her witty comments, instead of through her appearance. Her villainy differs from the fact that her voice and words communicate her opposition to Chell, thus eradicating any need to diminish her intelligence with skimpy clothing or any physical feature that detracts from her words. Rather, Nicki described GLaDOS as not basely evil because she gives Chell puzzles to solve as opposed to shooting at her. While Nicki did perceive the games as communicating critique on class structure, it was not as interesting as her assessment on gender representation, which correlated to her fascination with character development.

As an aside, despite citing specific examples where the games critiqued class and race, Nicki affirmed that those situations arose irrespective of Valve's intentions. Instead of making larger commentaries on capitalism, Valve is critiquing the misuse of power from people in science and corporations. Yet, a few cited examples include Cave Johnson's mistreatment of homeless test-takers or Wheatley's lack of intelligence as representative of the lower class. In a similar way, Nicki also did not consider Valve representing race or sex because players cannot see Chell on a regular basis. Nicki does mention, however, that Chell could be half white or part Asian or Latina due to her tan skin color, thus contributing to the discussion that Valve could have been subtle in portraying a biracial protagonist. Yet, she does not think that Valve was directly intentional to speak about representing racial equality. Most of Nicki's attention was on the combination of GLaDOS' great representation of gender and strong character development, which enhanced Nicki's experience in detecting themes in the narrative.

While narrative is important to Nicki, she postulates that the Portal series is entirely character driven and "about interaction between people...personalities," (lines 774-775). So, for her, the main point of the games is to see the characters develop and transform with power. While this is her perspective on the games, Nicki's perspective does conflict with my notion that

video games, especially the two *Portal* games are thematically driven. I do think that characters are integral to fulfilling the themes, especially since my themes incorporate the main characters. Her opinion that the game centers on the interactions between different oppositional characters reflects some of my specific themes, as I do comment on the sadistic nature of the relationship between Chell and GLaDOS and the repetition of death and sublimation of death as manifestations of Chell's confrontations with GLaDOS. Even Nicki's acknowledgment of GLaDOS as a strong female character does correlate to my theme of gender depiction through exploration of the space. Still, while Nicki does not agree that the games intended to be used as critiques of politics of identity, she does critically investigate Chell's motive to escape. After learning that her process of escaping destroys the facility, therefore causing GLaDOS to retaliate, Nicki suggests that the player/Chell helps rebuild the Aperture Labs because Chell learns that destroying it only hurts GLaDOS. So, for Nicki, the critical content comes from decentering one's own position from the first game, a contention that I agree is crucial in GLaDOS' transformation. Thus, it is this decentering that gave Nicki the idea that race, sex, and class are not too important for the *Portal* story. For her, while it was important that GLaDOS is a female personality, race, class, and sexuality have little to do with GLaDOS' transformation or the other characters' inabilities to cope with power.

### *Rucksbin's Interpretation*

Rucksbin's perspective most closely aligns with mine; after articulating that one significant theme is Chell's isolation, supported through the process of gameplay and Chell's character development, Rucksbin also considered this theme as forming a foundation for his interpretation of the whole story. Moreover, he also perceived that the politics of representation,

meaning Chell's race, sex, class, and gender expression also contribute to her feelings of isolation. This theme establishes his insights concerning his discussion of politics of representation and narrative elements.

To briefly describe his perspective of the narrative elements in the *Portal* narrative, I provide a short explanation of his insights. For the first *Portal*, he described the story as a woman's plight in solving different puzzles and resolving difficult situations, thus providing Chell with a choice to choose between "the order" (line 55) and "her own destiny," (line 56). In the sequel, the plot unravels to show the transfer of control and power from GLaDOS to Wheatley and back to GLaDOS. When asked about character design, Rucksbin expressed that Wheatley and GLaDOS were funny, mean, and vulnerable in certain ways, thus inferring that the complex characters made it difficult to give a simplistic description of them. In terms of the setting, Rucksbin described it as "Applish", as in the Apple company, which referred to its orderly and neat organization of space and design of robots. Such details in the setting conveyed the transmission of control between certain characters, as well as the communicating the themes Rucksbin perceived.

His discussion of themes reflected his observation of different thematic development in both games. For example, the theme of isolation was evident from the first *Portal* game. *Portal 2*, however, differed in that it was primarily focused on the control vs. chaos or woman vs. man struggle. Constructing the struggle in a binary between GLaDOS and Wheatley, Rucksbin explained that Chell participates in the male and female struggle when she bonds with GLaDOS. Since I perceived a relationship between Rucksbin's comment on one of the male and female struggle theme and the representation of gender, I asked him about this after he answered the question on theme. Rucksbin further elaborated on how he saw the male and female struggle as

an additional theme. He considered Chell and GLaDOS strong and complex female characters, the original characters. So, he considered Wheatley's and Cave's reactions to power as enacting the typical stereotype of men in power. So, the gameplay in the second game is about restoring the power and giving it to the female original characters.

Although Rucksbin did not elaborate too much on the interesting theme, he did specify that the games communicated an underlying message of escape from death. It is parallel to my theme of sublimated death drive, thus reinforcing the relevance of our perspective and also illustrating the effective way that Valve communicated its messages to the game player. More importantly, the manner by which Rucksbin talked about plot development inferred that he perceived a theme as forming the plot. If perceived in this manner, his point reinforces my whole pedagogy in games without Rucksbin overtly stating that the theme envelops his interpretation of the other narrative elements. In a similar manner, when asked about the symbols of the game, Rucksbin discussed the companion cube as being a symbol for Chell's isolation, which was a theme that he perceived. After he described her as being the only human, Rucksbin further stated that the cube was her only friend, or object that reflected her lonely status. So when GLaDOS forces Chell to dispose the object, Rucksbin realized that Chell was the only woman in the Lab, thus further depicting her loneliness and the theme of isolation.

When asked about the representations of class, sex, and race, his answers related to the theme, "Chell's isolation". Most of his answers about the politics of representation related to Chell's identity, or his interpretation of how she is represented with regards to social class, racial identity and sexual identity. Like many of his peers, Rucksbin cited Chell's wardrobe and a robot hitting on Chell as examples of representation of sexuality in the game. First, he said that Chell did not wear a sexy outfit, only a jumpsuit that she takes off only to reveal a tank top.

Then, Rucksbin commented that there was an adventure core during the boss fight in *Portal 2* who refers to Chell as “hey pretty lady.” Instead of reflecting Chell as a stereotypically feminine female, however, he interpreted the example of the adventure core hitting on Chell as a way to make fun of masculine behavior. Although he referred to masculine behavior as “it’s more making fun of guys,” (line 219), I interpret his comment in two ways. Rucksbin meant that the behavior is indicative of men hitting on women or other desired beings in a certain way. Another meaning is that only men act in this way, thus making Rucksbin only refer to catcalling as an activity that men partake. When asked about representation of class, he commented on Chell’s appearance—her dirty hair and jumpsuit—as signifying a lower class status, a detail that is tantamount to Cave’s poor treatment of lower class test-takers. In terms of her racial identity, Rucksbin considered Chell “a little Latina, maybe mixed,” (lines 235-236), but that the rest of the cast is white. Comparing racial inequality to class issues, Rucksbin immediately commented that the unequal representation of different races brings up class issues. He further supported his assertion by commenting, “white ruling over the world,” (line 245) as an explanation for how the games show oppression towards the minorities. By connecting this observation with the theme of Chell’s loneliness, Rucksbin further explained that the white CEO, Cave Johnson, ruled over the Aperture Lab as seen in his vocal presence, while Chell is the only isolated minority plotting her escape. Similar to Simba’s assessment of Chell’s mixed minority status, Rucksbin also confessed that she could be mixed race or marginally a minority yet still could experience loneliness. Both Simba and Rucksbin perceived loneliness as a theme, which they attributed strictly to Chell’s experiences of isolation. Moreover, her racial minority status, albeit mixed with white, further impacted her loneliness. Dante, another participant, also revealed similar insights about the male vs. female struggle. While I do not talk about his interview in greater

detail, I do include his perspective on the representation of class and gender representations to further support Rucksbin's assessment.

Dante mentioned that the story in *Portal 2* revealed reversals in class oppression and gender oppression. For example, GLaDOS was at the top of the class structure, but she becomes a "slave" to the higher order, which becomes Wheatley, who previously was part of the lower class, demonstrated by his job function and intelligence level. In a similar way, Dante thought that *Portal 2* showed how women gained power, both in Chell and GLaDOS' representation. He described Chell as doing masculine activities, such as solving puzzles and jumping around the setting, yet Wheatley is portrayed as an idiot therefore not the strong and masculine type of guy. GLaDOS is his superior in terms of her intelligence, despite being turned into a potato. Her previous identity as Caroline, however, shows that she was an "idiot airhead" who was reluctant to speak when Cave asked for her opinion in contradistinction to her identity as GLaDOS, a strong, intelligent, and assertive being. Thus, one interesting correlation between Rucksbin's view and Dante's view is that they both perceived a dichotomy between male and female and masculinity and femininity. While Rucksbin perceives that the characters embody a gender struggle, Dante perceives that the games attempt to resolve the gender struggle by attributing masculinity to the female characters and a loss of power to the male characters. In both perspectives, gender roles becomes a significant issue in the narrative, even though both assert that playing as a female does not really affect their gameplay.

When asked if Rucksbin learned anything further from the games, he answered that he learned that he felt badly for GLaDOS losing power. Moreover, the games show that sometimes society controls its people, and sometimes the people just have to "go through the actions," (line 313). His interpretation of the games assert that the games are metaphorical for situations in life

when one feels constricted by a controlling superior; certainly his description of Chell's loneliness captures a multiracial woman's experience in a white male dominated circle in any context. By communicating such serious themes and affirming the games' serious content, Rucksbin proves that the *Portal* games broach grave discussions about issues on different aspects of power and control. Like Simba previously mentioned, some players can choose to perceive deeper insights that the games communicate; Rucksbin further depicted an inclination to perceive the ways that the games critique the norms.

### *Gentry's Interpretation*

Gentry elaborated on a rich and elaborate interpretation of the story, using many of the literary elements especially setting, use of symbols, theme, and character. In fact, for Gentry, the symbols and setting seem to factor as significant points in the plot development that created the story, instead of being secondary to the story. His interpretation is complex, as he described how significant the setting contributed to the experience of getting to know both Wheatley and GLaDOS.

After stating that the Portal games did not need a story to be considered a successful game, Gentry did indicate the relevance of Rattman's backstory. Being the first one to do so, he elaborated on Rattman's left drawings on the wall, a feature that was important to Gentry's experience since there are Easter eggs involved in interacting with the Rattman dens. Describing them as gibberish that one cannot understand, he further discussed Rattman as a significant character whose cryptic drawings and equations on the wall affects the main story, despite his absence in the main part of the game. Explaining Rattman as one of a symbol, he elaborated on the symbolism as if discussing a theme; he articulated that Rattman is trying to warn the player

or Chell about the dangers of technology by writing his concerns, messages, and cautionary advice to solve some of the puzzles. After stating that “walk in between old and new” (line 253) is a significant symbol, Gentry explained that the fact that the player experiences the opposition between the old decaying nature of the facility and the new crisply constructed puzzle rooms makes the player realize the dangers of technology. Gentry commented,

“You can see like, ‘oh like, the old is decaying and it’s sort of going back to nature so you can kind of see like old just falls apart and dies. But you can also see that the old—the old is more natural. And you come to things like black and white like clean rooms, all this future technology, things put together---and new. But then, there’s also...Rattman. He’s just lecturing on like—all these symbols and rants and stuff like that about things...how stuff is turning, like technology is turning against us. Like how technology is our downfall,” (lines 257-266).

From his explanation of the symbol of the liminal status between the old and new, Gentry shows a conflation between a symbol, a theme, and a character. His incorporation of three literary elements indicates that all three are used to convey the theme of technological advancement as not necessarily bringing progress. Earlier in the interview when I asked Gentry to state a theme in the story, he explained his first noted theme as “destruction through advancement,” (lines 135-136). Further explaining the ironic connection between disastrous results from scientific technological advancement, he discussed that in the games, the plot shows that people are used as test subjects but become subsequently killed either in the process or just as part of the experiment itself. Gentry restated this theme when he elaborated on the symbol of walking between the old and new. Even earlier than his explanation of the themes when he described the Rattman dens, he defined Rattman as one of the researchers who managed to survive after GLaDOS killed everyone. Defining his story as one of the backstories yet one of

the characters who affects the main narrative of the game, Gentry perceived Rattman as that character who makes his presence known through exploring the setting. Exploration of the space was one of Gentry's favorite aspects to the game, as he replayed the second game after reading about the Bring Your Daughter to Work Day science projects. He commented that another backstory was Chell's minor history as a young child who visited the Lab because her father was one of the scientists, yet she became trapped in stasis and awoken in the start of the first *Portal*. His comments indicate that the smaller details, such as the potato plant and Rattman's scribbles, contribute to the story more than would be expected if one just plays to watch the main characters interact. Gentry's early mentioning of Rattman is similar to Subject A's perspective, another participant in my study, who described the *Portal* narrative from Rattman's perspective. Subject A asserts that the whole point of the game is to see how Rattman's messages are trying to tell the player as Chell that GLaDOS is lying to Chell and that she caused the destruction of the facility. Chell's job is to uncover this truth by solving puzzles and defeating her—a result that Rattman is aware of since he perceives Chell as the only person capable of defeating GLaDOS due to Chell's tenacity, which is referenced in one of his drawings. Subject A mentioned that Rattman is aware of GLaDOS' evil murdering tendencies because he was a visiting scientist, who was wary of the how Aperture was marketing GLaDOS as a new achievement in science. He also explains that the imagery of the companion cube as a loyal friend who talks to Rattman suggests that the player could feel strange about trusting Rattman's logic since Rattman is schizophrenic. By following the Rattman's comments and messages, Chell realizes that the Labs were responsible for dangerous scientific experiments that killed the participants. I find it interesting that Subject A also described Rattman's perspective as “a background perspective,” (lines 144-145), thus comparing his view to Gentry's view. It is not

clear whether Gentry saw Subject A's gameplay before playing the game an interviewing with me. While their views are similar, they expressed their perspectives in their unique voices, thus making me consider that perhaps the games' ability to communicate led them to make similar assertions about Rattman.

Another way that Gentry combined themes, symbols, and characters is shown when he articulated the theme that one's goodness aligns with a loss of power. After explaining his first theme of technological advancement causing destruction, he articulated another theme by incorporating both Wheatley and GLaDOS' character development; they only help Chell when they seek to recover or get power. Ultimate power over the Lab drives both to insanity, yet Gentry also clarified that the robotic characters have intelligence in a way that Chell does not. Contrary to other participants, he considered Chell's ability to solve puzzles inferior to the intelligence of the AIs who were able to control different pumps and systems, while Chell could only create tunnels with her portal gun. Later in the interview when asked about the symbols in the games, he discussed the way the *Portal* series shows the dangerous side of scientific progress and also mentioned the abuse of power as another symbol. Further elaborating on his explanation of the symbol or theme, he stated, "whoever is...dependent on you and not in control is...good to you," (line 278-279). He also used both GLaDOS and Wheatley to show the relevance of the symbol, which he described more like a theme rather than a symbol. Gentry liked to articulate the themes as symbols and symbols are short succinct versions of themes.

Another interesting aspect to Gentry's perspective is his interpretation that the setting affected the gameplay, or, rather, the way that he navigated the space. Although the narrative is linear in that players must portal to get out of rooms instead of openly exploring the setting to get out of the rooms, Gentry admitted that the spooky feeling of the setting affected how he walked

around the space in the game. He cited the example of the giant dome in *Portal 2*, where the rails are broken down and some of the walkways are sunk in poisonous fluid. He cited the time when Cave Johnson talks about asbestos, so Gentry considered that he was not supposed to be at the cite, even though he was aware of participating in a game, not really navigating the space itself. Despite the careful protection of a digital environment, he still felt that he, embodying Chell, was not supposed to be in that environment.

While Gentry did feel that the games portrayed oppression between the wealthy class and the lower classes, he did not feel that the games portrayed any progressive movements to represent racial equality or strong women. He suggested that the games needed to be more obvious with showing Chell as a strong female. Yet, even if the game developers made Chell into a man, it would not change the game mechanics, thus showing that gender identity did not affect the gameplay experience even though it could change the nature of GLaDOS' sarcastic comments. In regards to race, he did note Chell's skin phenotype and considered that she could be any race or a mix of races. Yet, her racial ambiguity did not matter to the gameplay experience. Since Cave Johnson and Caroline are the only other characters with white racial identity, the games do not prove for equal representation in racial depiction. He also commented that the sexual nature of Cave and Caroline's relationship but made no mention of Chell's sexuality because he did not see that she had a sexual nature to her character. While Gentry was unaware of my analysis of themes, his responses reflect similarities to my insights, especially concerning our observation of the manner by which the space informs the players on the nature of the characters.

## *V.II. Implications of Different Experiences of the Portal Narrative*

Since I did not use these interpretations of the games to “prove” the validity of my analysis, I present my participants’ views to show the plurality of interpretations even though some similarities arise. Even though the participants differed in opinion in terms of the thematic development as being paramount to structuring the other narrative elements, I note that they all mentioned specific “messages” that the games communicated in a subtle way. Even if some specified that other narrative elements were more significant to the narrative structure of the games, their responses reflect that what they identified as “embedded messages” or “themes” were as significant the narrative elements they deemed most important, for example, character in Nicki’s case. When some participants prefaced their interpretations by specifying an area of interest, like Ellen’s interest in character development and Wesley’s interest in the video game culture, it explained reasons that some participants specified on character or the metaphorical nature of Portal’s narrative. When asked to articulate the themes in the narrative, the participants elaborated on issues that demonstrated their area of interest. For example, both Ellen and Nicki discussed themes that dealt with character development because as gamers and game developers, they considered character development crucial to a good game. One interesting comment not previously discussed also shows a preoccupation with the way one participant’s assertion of a theme accounted for issues of politics of representation.

One participant, Simon Tam, stated a theme that attempted to resolve the issue of differences in class, race, gender, and sexuality when discussing artificial intelligence and the power they wield over the humans. One of his themes was the idea that diversity required a common enemy to resolve differences, an idea that he previously elaborated on in a course paper. Since humans use their differences as motives for social division, the only way to unite humans is to establish a common enemy. Relating the representation of artificial intelligence as

a common enemy in the *Portal* series to the science fiction *Ender's Game* series, Simon Tam describes that a common enemy is required in order to unite humans despite their differences. He states, “maybe the only way to overcome discrimination completely is that he have to have like a common enemy,” (lines 302-304) and “it’s like that division...between humans and artificial intelligence replaces racial divisions we have within us,” (lines 309-312). He examined the role that artificial intelligence had on social diversity and the way that Valve attempted to communicate a resolution to conflicts by having artificial intelligence function as a unifying factor. In other words, in order to eradicate one enemy—the way that politics of identity cause social rupture—another enemy needs to be created. While GLaDOS is a form of artificial intelligence, Simon Tam’s assessment seems irrelevant, since GLaDOS has to collaborate with Chell to defeat Wheatley. Yet, perhaps he was referring to GLaDOS’ humanity in combination with Chell’s human identity that bonded them to defeat Wheatley, or he used the *Portal* narrative as a metaphor to assert his theme.

As I analyze my comments and those of my participants, I realize a few similarities in our interpretations of the *Portal* narrative. Firstly, we deeply admired both games—sometimes favoring the second game in the series—for their gameplay and narrative precisely for the reason that the Valve game developers wrote the games so that the gameplay and narrative interconnected. Secondly, we focused on GLaDOS’ character development for most of our discussions of themes in the games or observations made about the games. In other words, her character was crucial in articulating larger themes in the games concerning issues such as female gender identity, power, and intelligence. Thirdly, the games prompted us to make deep elaborations about the narrative, as if the ingenuity in the games elicited this reaction. While one could conduct a deep analysis on embedded messages in another adventure game, such as any

one of the *Legend of Zelda* games, I feel such analyses would not convey the same amount of depth due to the goals of the games. In the *Portal* series, the goals for the player is to solve puzzles but also to witness GLaDOS' transformation and restore her to her body that entailed a process of living through different bodies—machine, human, and potato. Also the player's embodiment of Chell was more accessible to the player due to the fact that she is the only human wandering an abandoned science lab that resembled some warehouses filled with artifacts familiar to the contemporary player. Such examples include Cave's portraits, the old fashioned computers, the progression to incorporating different machines and robots, the "Applish" design of GLaDOS and the turrets. While the games reflected a dystopic society, it also reflected our current practices and concerns, including dark humor that shares a similar chord to popular offbeat TV shows. While *Legend of Zelda* fans may argue that they also embody Link's avatar and empathize with his troubles during his many quests, the fantasy setting may take the player away from his or her everyday world, thus making the discussions of the quests more metaphorical than the goals in *Portal* that also use figurative language while actually experiencing them. *Portal's* mysterious qualities, such as Rattman's dens, Chell's parents, and the whereabouts of all the previous test-takers, leave it open to the player's imagination, so that she is given the option of relating to Chell's loneliness in the particular ways influenced by her life experiences. The fact that Chell's identity itself is mysterious allows players to project themselves onto her and use her loneliness as a way to reframe her own.

Even in a progressive and interactive adventure indie game like, *Gone Home*, the goal of finding objects to solve a mystery leads the player to a specific story. For instance, using the first-person perspective, the player embodies a female character, Kaitlin, whose goal is to enter her former home to see the events that transpired while she was in Europe for a year. While the

player resolves the whereabouts of her missing family during one stormy night, the player's main goal is to find her sister's progression of coming out as a lesbian. Through notes, journals, pictures, vocal recordings, and drawings that the player finds, Kaitlin uncovers her sister's deep love for her friend, who becomes her girlfriend. While the gameplay and narrative interconnection is similar to *Portal*, the narrow scope of the narrative in *Gone Home* makes a narrative goal to have players empathize and experience someone close to them coming out as queer; some players may sympathize with the narrative because it reminds them of friends coming out or help them come out or redefine the norms of love. Yet, the *Portal* narrative's broader depiction of loneliness and isolation makes the player insert as many experiences onto their embodiment of Chell as possible, causing her loneliness and willingness to escape to function as a metaphor for a larger set of personal experiences. I am not arguing that this aspect makes *Portal* games better, rather that different players perceive different aspects that reflects a personal part of their lives. Thus, a final similarity between all the insights on the *Portal* series is that the games took a deeper meaning than the linear story. Thus, while many players reveal different interpretations, the core of the linear story remains constant as a story concerning a woman trapped in a science Lab by a seemingly malicious robot.

In the concluding chapter, I briefly explain the players' subjective interpretations as the particular way that technology enframes their experiences thus affecting their perspectives of narrative themes and character tropes. In addition, I assess Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy as a pedagogical model, one that extends diagnostic critique of cultural artifacts in the cultural studies tradition to video games. I examine the two components of enacting the pedagogical model on an individual and a collective basis. Finally, I look at the limitations and further implications of my study and Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy as an educational model.

## Chapter VII

### *Conclusion: Implications for Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy*

In this chapter, I briefly summarize my goals for this project and assess whether I answered my research questions. I consider a few limitations and implications that my work makes for future directions for my pedagogical model.

In this project I set out to create a pedagogical model based on the cultural studies tradition, focusing more on video games rather than films and TV shows. By emphasizing narrative in games, I considered themes—in the context of a literary element, Paulo Freire’s generative theme, and Ian Bogost’s notion of themes in unit operations—as the core elements in video games that communicates the player’s perceived ideas manifested through learning in gameplay. My goal was to develop Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy as a means to discover ways that students learn through video game narratives beyond the game mechanics and raise critical awareness of the particular issues revealed through the discussion of themes. I selected the *Portal* series for the following reasons: 1. Its use in elementary through college classes made it an exemplary way that students use video games in educational settings, 2. It is a series where the antagonist and protagonist are both female, 3. In addition to its challenging puzzles, the writing of the game garnered attention from gaming reviews, 4. Its popularity with different gamers and gaming community made the games exemplary artifacts to test the pedagogical model. By asking different players to analyze the themes or “embedded messages,” I initially wanted to see what they learned, specifically the ways the players perceive the representation of

gender, race, sexuality, and class in the game series. Since Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy follows the cultural studies tradition, two significant tasks were to analyze the games themselves and ask other players their perceptions of the games. I initially analyzed the games and my analysis of the pertinent themes prior to seeking out other perspectives. Then, I searched for different participants by asking people online who have played the games, and I posted flyers to different community colleges, state universities, and universities. I only received most of my participants, once I contacted a games scholar who contacted his students. After receiving numerous emails, I narrowed down my list to 18 participants and interviewed them.

Since I was also seeking the different ways that players perceived and experienced the game narrative, I used a phenomenological approach in qualitative studies and conducted interviews to generate my data. After transcribing and coding 18 interviews, I organized the data and selected participants to closely examine based on their comments on the politics of representation. Although I detailed five participants' experiences, I commented specifically on an additional five participants due to their poignancy and similarity in insights with the chosen five participants. The participants discussed their perceived embedded messages in their interpretations of the *Portal* narrative, ranging from stories concerning female empowerment over capitalism to a hidden mother-daughter relationship. Although each participant's perspective was unique and influenced by his or her life experiences, we shared similarities in our interpretations, as witnessed in our unanimous focus on our perspectives on GLaDOS' complex character and the representation of the use of technology in relation to power. While there were broad themes that we shared in our perspectives of the narrative, each participant, myself included, these themes became more specific to our particular insights as we discussed further explained our perception. Thus, I revisit my research questions.

- i) What are the themes I see within the games and how does it provide structure for the overall Portal narrative?
- ii) What are other interpretations of the Portal game series' narratives? What are some embedded messages that others see in the narrative that could possibly relate to politics of identity: race, gender, class, and sexuality?
- iii) How do the different interpretations of the game narrative enact Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, as an educational model that shows a reciprocal relationship among the player's identity, the game, and the player's unique experiences of the game narrative through gameplay?

I answer the first research question in my fourth and fifth chapters, where I discuss the themes that I perceive and the game as a cultural artifact. Since I am discussing the game as a cultural artifact, my explanation of the game is thorough and lengthy. In these two chapters, I focus on the way these games critically reflected themes, such as “the mother-daughter relationship between Chell and GLaDOS” as a sadist homoerotic relationship, sublimation of the death drive, fallacy of self-mastery, and gender expression through space exploration. Borrowing a few concepts from psychoanalytic theory from the literary theory tradition, I reflected on the relevance of the libidinal and death drives, showing how the games commented on life and death. Since death was relevant not only through GLaDOS' duplicitous behavior but also in the decline of Aperture's different time periods, I focused on its deeper implications, especially in regards to life, the position that many would initially consider the counterpoint of death. By investigating the relationship between life and death further, I uncovered the aforementioned themes while also taking into account the sexual subtext and strong gender depiction. Taking into account the gameplay mechanics of the game, I focused my analysis of the narrative considering two different ways that the themes affected the plot and character development. This observation, however, developed after I fully articulated the themes in the process of generating my own analysis. Upon further reflection, I noticed that the themes

cohered to two different ways to read the plot development, thus making the theme on GLaDOS' and Chell's homoerotic relationship more esoteric and the gender development through space more accessible. The idea that a game communicates two different ways that thematic development lends to anamorphic ways to read the plot and characters is one that I would further test for other puzzle-adventure games and games with rich narratives. Fulfilling the audience reception part of the cultural studies model, I compared my analysis with those of the participants.

My analysis of my participants' experiences answers the second research question, which is articulated in detail in my sixth chapter. Given the exploratory nature of my study, I did not use the data from my participants as a means to validate my own analysis, rather, their experiences contributed to the richness of the gameplay experience and the different iterations of the Portal narrative despite sharing similar themes. While participants expressed a range of themes that were similar to each other, many perceived positive and negative representations of gender and class, while only a few noted suggestions to Chell's sexuality and her mixed racial identity. Since my pedagogical model borrows from the cultural studies tradition of using diagnostic critique of artifacts to look at the politics of representation, I selected the interviews that reflected some thought on how race, gender, class, and sexuality were represented in the games. Some of the insightful interpretations of the narrative, however, reflected that the participants focused more on the story as opposed to the politics of representation. For these interviews, I included excerpts of them, as some of them corroborated with details from the five detailed experiences. One unanticipated conclusion from the data collection was related to the participant's willingness to share aspects of their lives or personalities that affected the way that I

interpreted their perspectives. I state that it is an unanticipated conclusion because it was not a detail that I was screening in the interviews, but it arose in the data collection.

This unanticipated observation reflects my reframing of the last research question that previously only addressed the manner by which the study enacted Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy. Yet, I reframed the question to include the reciprocal relationship among the subject, cultural artifact, and the phenomena of interpreting the narrative. While it is understood that the subject plays the game in order to have a certain experience of the narrative and communicate the learned embedded messages, the subject's description of the embedded message, a detail from the phenomenon of experiencing the narrative, also reveals part of the subject's identity even though the subject may not draw direct connections between the story and her life. My implications section in the sixth chapter explains this relationship. Given that the educational experience itself is a subjective experience, this detail corroborates with sociocultural educational theory, as outlined in Ian Bogost's work on procedural literacy. Thus, not only did all participants, myself included, select pertinent themes to our experience of the narrative and depict the ways that the games addressed the politics of representation, but our depictions of the narrative addressed certain parts of our identities. Some of these implications were directly stated in the interview when a participant would mention her major and focus on game design or the fact that they read up on Valve Software's attention towards gamers.

Since I did not know these participants further than the information they were comfortable sharing, I made inferences on the information they did give. For example, Subject A, the only participant who responded to my initial inquiry on YouTube, mentioned that his deep analysis arose from his own fascination with stories that developed since childhood. Thus, I inferred that his preferences to enjoy stories led to his rant on GLaDOS' true identity as Chell's

mother. Another participant, Simon Tam, based his analysis of conflicts within diversity in the games—most evident in the way that issues of Chell’s racial diversity was resolved through the creation of GLaDOS, the AI antagonist—to a paper he had written, which analyzed a similar theme in *Ender’s Game*, a contemporary science fiction novel. Since I sensed that he was proud of his paper and his thoughts—further supported when I gave him positive feedback during his interview—I realized that his own analysis of Chell’s racial diversity and the way that humans deal with racial, gender, or sexual difference is to unite under a common enemy. After I had read through the interviews and my own analysis of their thoughts, I had contacted them to help give me more information like the city and state where they played the games. If I knew the city or state, I could better decipher aspects to their identity, as one’s cultural environment significantly affects their interpretations of media artifacts. Yet, no one responded, perhaps alluding to the possibility that they found the question pervasive. At any rate, a significant portion of the third research question was answered through the information I did gather from my participants, most of who did feel very comfortable sharing bits of personal information.

I answered the third research question, however, through the fact we already shared similarities in subjectivity in that the perimeters of the call for participants already implicated that the participants pursued higher education, liked the game, perceived a narrative, and expressed a desire to communicate their perspective. Regardless of other personal aspects to their own personalities, we all live in a current society where such narratives—an AI threatening a human—is already a common trope in science fiction novels and movies. Furthermore this trope is an updated version of the Nordic trope of heroes vs. monsters. For example, the *Volsunga Saga* shows Sigurd, the hero with unknown parents, who uses smart advice from Odin to slay the clever dragon, Fafnir, who taunts Sigurd about death and his familial identity. Thus,

contemporary audiences have inherited an antagonizing relationship between hero and monster from oral tradition, yet the *Portal* games reinvigorate it by addressing GLaDOS as a problematic antagonist. In fiction, there is the notion of the problematic hero as a hero with strength and intelligence but also with an equal amount of flaws. Thus, I refer to GLaDOS as a problematic antagonist, one who is strong and intelligent but has difficulty destroying the hero. Although no one, including myself, previously referred to GLaDOS as such, everyone addressed GLaDOS' depiction in character development as a significant feature in the game narrative. Through the digital format and ability to embody the hero, players, myself included, experienced GLaDOS' transformation as if it were appearing in front of us. Finally, the fact that we shared our experiences after the interview questions were over made it seem as if we were part of a sub-group of gamers who liked to talk about *Portal*. Thus, I did not worry about learning about the player's identity prior to learning about their analysis of the game. Rather, the interpretations themselves conveyed aspects of their identities, since it asked for their articulation of what they learned. By essence, the process of this study enacted a discussion between the educator and her students, even though I had individual meetings with them as opposed to a larger group discussion.

Thus, in considering deeper implications of the third research question, I perceive this enactment of the "educator and student discussion" as having a diverse set of applications for further research. One approach is to look within the model and see how it generates discussion on how to better address the way that narrative elicits facets of students' identities and ways that they learn. Although I used the *Portal* games as a case study to test Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, the model itself can apply to other puzzle-adventure games or games with rich narratives. Games are the medium that allow for students to consider the ways by which their

own participation impacts their learning through narrative. While one could argue that this occurs in any active discussion or any deep investigation of a medium, games are different due to the immediacy of the embodiment process. In this method, one looks at games as the medium that also informs on student subjectivity. Thus, it also is a meta-commentary on the roles of the student and teacher in the educational field in terms of how games mediate between their experiences and how they share their information. If perceiving the educator's interpretation as the master narrative, the students could elaborate on it, counter its validity, or modify it according to their understanding.

Another use of this pedagogical model refers to its direct use in current liberal arts classrooms when discussing a range of narratives on a certain theme, so the class would focus more on the thematic issues and how games approach themes differently than other media. This approach is also applicable in video game studies or media arts classes, where the students critically investigate games with rich narratives to help them develop better stories and gameplay with more complex representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Many of the participants stated that race was not a part of identity that the *Portal* games had indirectly commented on, so further discussions on *Portal*, or a similar critically acclaimed game that does not include discussions of race, may use time in the classroom specifying ramifications for not doing so. Yet, the fact that a few participants examined race or sexuality shows that the model might be used to better bring such issues to the forefront. For video game design classrooms, students can address the manner by which they could address the politics of representation while still not making the games too didactic. Although games do have a pedagogical function, many of my participants stated that the embedded messages felt more meaningful due to the fact that the games took a more subversive way in communicating them. In other words, games that

appear too didactic result in being labeled exclusively educational games, which are a different category than popular video games with loaded critical issues.

Since the combination of different interpretations models a classroom discussion, I consider the possibility of an alternative method of holding a focus group of 15 participants to discuss the same issues targeted in my interview questions. Due to the interpersonal dynamics with each other, the individuals would gain insights and build their perspectives through discussion. Also, it would mimic more of the classroom discussion, considering that I would be leading the focus group. Not only would I capture more of my participants' identities, but I would also get another layer of their learning process: social factors impeding or expanding upon their behavior. While this is helpful to certain individuals, larger group discussions tend to quiet some dissenting perspectives, especially from shyer individuals. Moreover, while the focus group option helps participants including myself get to know each other better, the social aspect adds too much complexity if I am seeking the manner by which participants learn from the narrative. In my project, I gained depth into some of their perspectives, and I am not certain that as many participants would have elaborated to the extent they did if they were surrounded with 15 other participants. When reflecting on the interviews done in person, many chose to speak in a secluded outdoor area or a study room, thus showing a need to keep their ideas out of earshot. From the group of participants whose interviews were conducted through Skype, the majority only chose the audio function, thus shielding me from seeing their faces. Many chose to speak with me through Skype due to the convenience in schedule. As a result, I am more convinced that I chose the right method for my project in terms of witnessing their perspective of the game narrative and any correlations between their perspectives and their identities.

Finally, I consider the possibility that I may use this pedagogical model to investigate other games. While I would take a similar approach in my methods, my own analysis may differ, since each game or series reflects different theoretical concepts. Different themes structure each game, so I would explore different themes and how their form a foundation for the other narrative elements. Also, I would still consider the politics of representation and the manner by which they are interwoven within the games' themes. I would select a game with a rich narrative yet one whose story has reached the critic's attention, thus having cultural significance to different players. Unfortunately, I may encounter some issues, since the independent video game companies are prone to develop games with critical narratives but lack the popularity that mainstream games have. If this were the case, I may take a more proactive stance in selecting participants interested in playing the game to better spread more awareness to games with such content that allows for more critical discussion. While the *Portal* series is unique in its combination of popularity and critical narrative, I think that other games from independent companies may prove to be as successful, once given more attention. In this way, my model, Critical Narrative Gaming Pedagogy, would expand its function to helping gather attention to those games that do elicit critical thinking.

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