Integrating Narrative and Design:
A Portal Post-Mortem

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SPOILER ALERT!!

leave the room now if you hate spoilers
Topics

- Why Should You Care?
- Our Narrative Philosophy
- Our Development Process
Why Should You Care?

Why should you care about Portal?

- We had a small team.
- Portal has been both a critical and commercial success for Valve.
- After all is said and done and we don't have any regrets.
Why Should You Care?
Why Should You Care?

Why should you care about how we integrated narrative and design?

- By itself, the story wouldn’t make much of a novel.
- The gameplay on its own would be dry.
- The tight integration of our story and gameplay resonated with people.
- Team size imposed constraints on our design choices.
- Our design methods:
  - Low impact on both our time and energy budgets.
  - Helped creatively sidestep our constraints.
Our Narrative Philosophy

❖ Delta Theory

• Two Stories
  • Story-story
  • Gameplay story
• Lowering the delta will make your story more satisfying.
Our Narrative Philosophy

- Games with a high story delta:
Our Narrative Philosophy

❖ Games with a high story delta:
  • Clive Barker’s Undying
Our Narrative Philosophy

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Our Narrative Philosophy

Portal Narrative Design Goals

- “Story” story must never intrude on “Gameplay” story
- Less is more
- Be ruthless about trimming narrative fat
Our Process

- Playtesting
- Reflecting Story in Your Environment
- Evolve Narrative Out of Gameplay
- Evolve Gameplay Out of Narrative
Playtesting

Important to Narrative and Gameplay

- Watch your playtests
- Find out what your players actually want
  - Adjust gameplay to what players look like they need.
  - Adjust story to enhance what players are already feeling.
- Keeps you objective
  - Watching a playtest exposes what isn’t working.
  - If players can’t recall the story, it isn’t working.
Playtesting

- Playtest Early & Often
Advice!

- Writing a funny game?
  - God help you
- Tough guy dialog is endlessly macho
- Funny dialog is funny once
  - Maybe
Playtesting
Playtesting

✿ The Advice

• Trust your instincts
• Remember initial reactions
• Don’t despair
• Playtest!
Reflecting Story in Your Environment

- Embed exposition in the environment
  - Unless it’s in emails or voice recorders
  - Be creative!
    - Easy to say
    - Apply a rule set
    - Be ruthless about the rules
Reflecting Story in Your Environment

❄ What we did

- Wall scribblings in the behind-the-scenes areas
- Quick, easy, and effective
Reflecting Story in Your Environment
Reflecting Story in Your Environment
Evolve Narrative Out of Gameplay

- Write to enhance what playtesters are feeling
- Keep the story wet
- Don’t get too attached to anything
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

The Plan

• Box Marathon Level
• Long level with the box, in the end put the box on a button.

❖ Take One

• Moving lift obstacle course over a goo-pit.
• Players would destroy the box, and had to go back.
• Frustrating and annoying.
• Back to the drawing board.

❖ Take Two

• Remove the lifts and the goo-pit!
• Gameplay events where having the box is necessary.
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

❖ Take Two

- Gameplay events
- Always see the button.
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

❖ Take Two

- Gameplay
- Always see the button.
- Still needed something else...
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

- **Erik to the Rescue!!**
  - Try to hint using the environment.
  - When all else fails great dialogue is an excellent hint.
  - It worked!!
Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

- A Whole Lotta Love
  - And the afterthought.
  - Sometimes goofy ideas tend out to be really good ones.
Incineration Station – Boss Battle Training

• Why it worked!
  • Perfect Training Location.
  • More Satisfying Level Ending.
  • Players Learn Better When Not Stressed.
  • Revenge!

• Example of gameplay influencing story, which then influenced the gameplay.
Evolve Gameplay Out of Narrative

- Sometimes, gameplay isn’t enough
  - For instance, the original ending of Portal
  - We were surprised, too
GLaDOS Battle

What does a Portal boss battle look like?

• Obvious conclusion: A complex puzzle
  • Results: Pain
• Other attempts:
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One

✓ Conclusion
  • Lasers = Bad
    • Boring to dodge
    • Difficult to aim
    • Hard to tell if you’re hit
  • Abandoned in favor of rockets.
GLaDOS Battle - Attempt Two
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two

Conclusion:

- High Intensity = Bad
  - No one paid attention to GLaDOS
  - Alienated people who liked the slower-paced, cerebral nature of Portal
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three
GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three

⚠️ Conclusion:

- Chase Scene = Bad
  - Bad pacing
  - Poor communication with player
  - Too many art assets
  - Badly balanced gameplay
GLaDOS Battle

- Complex Boss Battle
  - Nope.
  - The more complex, the longer players would take, resulting in bad pacing.
GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt

❖ Complex Boss Battle
  • Nope.
  • The more complex, the longer players would take, resulting in bad pacing.

❖ What now?
  • We’re screwed.
  • Playtesting to the rescue!
  • The Fire Pit
GLaDOS Battle - Final Attempt
GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt

SENSE
This picture makes none
GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt
GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt

❖ What made the Fire Pit climactic?

• Time Pressure
• Visual Impact
• High Drama
• Easy Puzzle
Use Portals to Get From Here to Here.

Use Rockets to Hit the Personality Spheres Down
GLaDOS Battle – Time Pressure
The End
Embrace your constraints as fuel for creativity.

Have Faith!

- In your writing
- In the skills of your team
- Playtest, playtest, playtest
Questions? Comments?