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»You Really Do Have Brain-Damage, Don't You?«: Ridicule as Game Mechanic in the ›Portal‹-Series

Early in Portal 2, the game's Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System (GLaDOS) remarks to Chell, the player's avatar: »Most people emerge from suspension terribly undernourished. I want to congratulate you on beating the odds and somehow managing to pack on a few pounds«. ◂1 It is a biting (albeit funny) comment, and one that reverberates through a number of registers.

First, the comment is part of a salvo of ›fat jokes‹ that permeate the game. There is the moment when Core 3 (AKA »Fact Sphere«) insists »You could stand to lose a few pounds«, for instance, or Wheatley's repeated chants/taunts of »Fatty«. GLaDOS, of course, is the most consistently demeaning, chiding Chell for her »fat eyes« and proclaiming that »One of these times you'll be so fat that you'll jump, and just drop like a stone. Into acid, probably. Like a potato into a deep fat fryer«.

Second, the fat jokes are intended to be insulting, not just funny. They are undeniably nasty and depend on a certain cultural knowledge concerning body consciousness in relation to obesity. To be fathomable, a ›fat‹ or ›thin‹ joke-insult requires a concomitant social norm about an ›ideal‹ or ›normal‹ body. The presumption in Portal 2 – one drawn from real-world stereotypes – is that ›fat‹ equals incapable, undesirable, and even doomed.

Third, while Chell is ostensibly the focus of these joke-insults, the player is their real target. Just as with other first person games, Portal 2's visual perspective and direct address are designed to work conductively and immersively, to suture the player tightly to the narrative and the protagonist who drives it. The player is meant to inhabit the avatar and the game. Thus, when GLaDOS warns Chell – »The Enrichment Center regrets to inform you that this next test is impossible. Make no attempt to solve it« – she is actually inciting the player. The same is true when Aperture Science founder and CEO Cave Johnson ostensibly insults new test subjects about the »honorarium« they will receive for helping to »make science«: »For many of you, I realize 60 dollars is an unprecedented windfall, so don't go spending it all on…I don't know. Caroline, what do these people buy? Tattered hats? Beard dirt?« It takes no great inductive leap to see that the taunt is in fact directed toward real world players who complain about

the high cost of computer games ($60 being the typical market price for new games at Portal 2's release).

There are other registers to the game's ridicule as well, including avatar/player intelligence (e.g., »You really do have brain-damage, don't you?«), aptitude (e.g., »Please disregard any undeserved compliments«), and the like. The spectrum of the game's joke-insults is extensive, providing a veritable master class on the art of derision.

In this chapter, we consider the range and registers of this derision. We begin by discussing questions of pleasure and pain, and how the act of ridicule can be a nexus for both. We then explore examples of ridicule in the Portal series against the backdrop of humor studies. We conclude by asserting that acts of ridicule are fundamental to all computer games, and we theorize ridicule's role in game balance, interactivity, and the interdependence of humor, cultural norms, and play.

Ridicule and the Pain/Pleasure Nexus

While part of what makes the Portal series distinctive is the way it mocks the player relentlessly, all computer games evoke pain as part of their pleasure. The term ›pain‹ is derived from the Greek ποινή (*poine*) meaning a penalty one must pay, and in a ludic context this might include frustration, annoyance, confusion, anger, sadness, and disappointment. True to the term's etymology, such feelings are the price one pays for playing the game.

›Pleasure‹, on the other hand, encompasses experiences such as satisfaction, understanding, resolution, happiness, joy, contentment, and glee. In many instances, pleasure is a reward for enduring pain, as when players suffer numerous failures before finally succeeding, or when previously opaque patterns and alternatives become clear, thus revealing a game's win state. In fact, game balance may be understood as the design point at which pain is not too great for most players nor pleasure too easily attainable.◂2 Ironically, an excess of pleasure can easily devolve into boredom, a type of pain.

Scholars have long been interested in the locus of pleasure and pain, particularly as they function in ridicule. Dialectical methods ranging from a Platonic dialogue's use of feigned ignorance (*Socratic irony*) to the ancient practice of *dissoi logoi*, or contending with words and arguments, speak to the pleasurable and painful practice of using language dialogically to undermine others' ideas, beliefs, and actions. So too do contemporary practices such as *playing the dozens*. Traditionally but not exclusively a Black cultural practice, the *dozens* is an

agon in which participants exchange rounds of ridicule with the intent not just to best one another or win the competition but also to practice and attain »verbal dexterity« while learning to appreciate »the power of words« (Abrahams 1962, 209-10; 215). More than just a game of playful bullying through ridicule – ›yo' mama‹ jokes are a common form – it is a practice that conditions participants to ridicule and to accept being ridiculed, and has informed later kinds of verbal contests such as *battle rap* and sport *shit talking*, the goals of which are to ›get in your [opponent's] head‹ to distract as well as discompose him or her. Ridicule is not always as overtly combative as the dozens, however. In the spirit of Bakhtinian carnival, for example, many party games are designed explicitly to ridicule or embarrass participants – from *pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey*, *bobbing for apples, charades, limbo*, and *arm-, leg-*, and *thumb-wrestling* to *spin the bottle, beer pong*, and *strip poker*. In fact, entire industries have emerged that depend on the pleasure/pain nexus of ridicule: karaoke, talent shows, and reality television programming are just a few popular examples.

At any rate, from the perspective of the ludic pleasure-pain nexus, ridicule may be understood to be partly educational, not only in how it teaches one to ridicule productively and effectively, but also in how it teaches one to endure, how not to be humiliated, shamed, or embarrassed. Ridicule in this sense has long been a tool for acclimating people to ridicule, a phenomenon active in the Portal franchise to be sure; in the beginning, the games' ridiculing is surprising and unnerving, but by the end it is simply part of the play, along the lines of jumping and searching for cake.

Many commentators remark about the Portal franchise's use of humor, often in ways that hint at the pleasure/pain nexus. Less commonly discussed, however, is what Brent Hannify calls the games' »clandestine educational value« – »clandestine« because the learning (pain) sneaks in under the cover of humor (pleasure). Portal, for instance, signals the importance of humor and education in its opening scene: »fun and learning are the primary goals of the enrichment center activities«, intones GLaDOS. And while the game series requires players to use analysis and creativity to solve the many and increasingly difficult in-game problems, the learning is not limited to these problems. A number of educators employ the games in their classrooms to teach physics, geometry, thermal dynamics, and other topics (Hannify 2012; Hawley 2014).

Portal's developer, Valve, has acknowledged the link between learning and fun and reached out to educators and students. The company has not only invited the public to its corporate headquarters for learning events, but released the Steam for Schools platform, an online game distribution and communication site »specially designed for use by teachers and students in a school, af-

terschool or summer program setting« (Hannify 2012◂**3**). Again, though, what makes the franchise stand out for the committed and casual gamer alike is what most commentators generally call its humor. One reason for this attention, as a reviewer in the *Atlantic* (Machkovech 2011) notes, is that »When video games try to be funny, they tend to get laughed at, not with«. That is, most games that try to incorporate humor, as Evan Griffin (2011) puts it, »bomb, and bomb some more«. The effectiveness of the humor in Portal, for that matter, was cited as one of the reasons that it had been dubbed by many in the gaming community as the 2007 game of the year.◂**4** The games' humor has been so well received, in fact, that entire web pages (e.g., *Joyreactor*'s◂**5**) are dedicated to posting gags and GIFs that mimic the game, while a special effects guru recently created a humorous video short featuring an Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device (Doctorow 2012).

The franchise's educational value and humor are essentially inseparable. While the humor seems to invite (if not goad) gamers to complete increasingly challenging tasks, it also serves to condition users both to accept and be normed by humor within an educational context. This linkage between learning and enjoyment has long been recognized, from Quintilian (»...we see that the most ignorant person alive, when his passions are sufficiently warmed, has words at his will [and] the mind exerts itself« [1805, 295-96]) to Christopher Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's 2006 study which shows that students who have developed passion for a subject, who find pleasure in it, are more likely to remember what they have learned and thereby use it in future endeavors. This connection among memory, learning, engagement, and endurance in the face of ruthless critique is key not only to the pleasure/pain nexus established through GLaDOS' endless vituperations, backhanded compliments, and sass, but also to how other games work as well, from Sonic the Hedgehog's impatient foot tapping to Psychonauts' urging to »Press Play Now!« In other words, while it may be the case that ludic ridicule can enable some users – younger gamers and other ›more sensitive viewers‹, for example – to develop an ability to cope with ridicule in the real (e.g., the workplace or playground) or virtual (e.g., cyberbullying) worlds, there is no question that it always plays a key role in how players experience any given game (digital or not). The pleasure/pain nexus of ridicule is thus a *key* game mechanic; it does not just appear here and there, but is always at work, undermining players' confidence and sense of progression so that later successes are experienced as more rewarding, both for the gamer (the pleasure of play) and the consumer (the pleasure of a worthwhile purchase).

Having established the idea that ridicule is a game mechanic that actively participates in games' pleasure/pain nexus, we turn now to the matter of humor and ridicule's place within it. It is in this robust set of relationships, we propose, that one can begin to see how ridicule can work both sides of the pleasure/pain nexus, and also how ridicule itself can be – paradoxically – highly entertaining.

The Place of Ridicule in Humor Studies

Game reviewers and commentators have lauded and offered various assessments of the Portal franchise's humor. ›Dark‹ or ›black‹ are among the most common designations (Frum 2011; Biessener 2011; Davis 2011; Hannify 2012; Totilo 2011), and while some commentators have been drawn to the bumbling, ›comic foil‹ character of Wheatley in Portal 2 (e.g., Machkovech 2011), it is almost always GLaDOS' comedic vocalizations that garner the acclaim and occasional criticism.◂**6** GLaDOS is a surprisingly complex character whose personality, temperament, and use of humor change as the plots of both games develop. One blogger finds her to be »a cold yet weirdly nurturing AI« (Chandler), while another contends that, even though her voice drips »with sarcasm and malice, [...] her tone remains soothing and calm« (Frum 2011). Assessments of GLaDOS' humor vary: she is perceived as passive-aggressive as well as satirical and sardonic (Giantbomb◂**7**; Chandler 2013; Davis 2011); her style is »deadpan«◂**8** as she »taunts, teases, and threatens« (Machkovech 2011); and she is prone to »skewering« with »snark-filled quips« (Griffin 2011). All of these characterizations are either synonymous with or hyponyms of ridicule, and are clearly recognized as both callous and droll.

To understand how ridicule is able to slip along and across the axis between ludic pain and pleasure requires some examination of ridicule's place in humor studies. Because ridicule can just as easily elicit a whoop as a wince, it should be noted that the field of humor studies sometimes seems uncertain of ridicule's value and utility. It is not that the world is comprised of catagelophiles – people who take pleasure in ridicule and in being ridiculed – and catagelophobes – people who are afraid of being laughed at. It is that the difference between ›phile‹ and ›phobe‹ is often volatile. Beyond ›one person's tickle is another's taunt‹, ridicule can be hit or miss with the same person depending on location, who is nearby, what is on the news, who says it, how it is said, what was said earlier or later, and so on. Given such mercurial effects, it is hardly surprising that humor scholars have a difficult time zeroing in on how ridicule works. There are several prevailing theories of humor that offer glancing ex-

planations for how ridicule can roam so freely across the pleasure/pain nexus. Within each of these theories – known respectively as the *incongruity theory*, the *relief theory*, and the *superiority theory* – an allowance is made for ridicule effectively functioning in humorous (not simply derogatory) ways.◂9 As a result, each of these theories offers some insight into the Portal franchise's uses of humor – examples of each theory's claims about what makes things funny abound in the games – and of humorous ridicule, as well as into why gamers might be particularly prone to catagelophilia. Of the three theories, the superiority theory best accounts for how ridicule – especially of the sort that Cave Johnson, Wheatley, and GLaDOS dole out – can elicit pleasure, but the incongruity and relief theories each contribute unique approaches to ridicule that are useful to understand before unpacking superiority theory. We turn first to incongruity theory.

Incongruity Theory

As we describe below, the superiority and relief theories of humor are concerned with the psychology or inherent qualities of ridiculers and the ridiculed. The incongruity theory differs from these in that it attends specifically to the form of jokes themselves – their linguistic, semantic, and aesthetic qualities – not the people who tell them or the objects they describe. While the theory can turn inward, inquiring after, say, why one person finds a particular incongruity humorous while another does not, incongruity theory usually does not broach this terrain. More commonly, the incongruity theory of humor – first proposed by Frances Hutcheson in his 1750 book *Reflections upon Laughter and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* – contends that laughter arises from the recognition of odd contrasts, juxtapositions, and incompatible couplings (among other elements that fit the term ›incongruous‹) articulated in a joke. To illustrate this theory, Hutcheson offers an example of »great« men attending to their toilet. Regardless of caste, class, or power, all people must eventually use a toilet to relieve themselves, which, in the case of great men, may seem out of station, even while the natural act of defecating (for example) cannot be avoided. The humor of talking about a great man's toilet arises from the coupling of high and low, from the incongruity of the situation. As Hutcheson (1750) puts it, »the jest is increased by the dignity, gravity, or modesty of the person, which shows that it is this contrast, or opposition of ideas and dignity and meanness, which is the occasion of laughter« (ibid., 21).

Incongruity humor occurs often in the Portal games. Portal 2's Core 3, for example – ironically labeled a »Fact Sphere« – constantly spouts inanities such as, »To make a photocopier, simply photocopy a mirror« and »The square root

of rope is string«. In fact, at least one review of the Portal games specifically emphasizes the franchise's use of incongruity humor. Attempting to »pin down« the games' »comedic center«, David Chandler (2013) insightfully notes in an IGN blog post titled »Humor, Horror, and Tragedy in the Portal Franchise« that Portal's humor is based on a »›failing‹« to meet the conventions of typical »sci-fi horror games«. That is, part of the humor of the game arises from incongruity, from its evocation of science and horror genres juxtaposed such that it purposefully undermines both genres through spectacles of decay and the invitation to play among the rubble. The incongruity occurs through teasing player expectations: »Aperture Science fits the mold as a system in a state of constant error«. The games' »masterstroke« is the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device »that allows the player to manipulate the environment in fun, bizarre ways: infinite falls, crazy bouncing physics«. While many players and commentators find the games' humor primarily in the dialogue provided by Wheatley, GLaDOS, and Cave Johnson, Chandler suggests that there is »something darker at work«, that the humor is centered in the »unscripted nonsense that [arises] from experimentation«. The physical comedy, argues Chandler, »breaks the game's façade of scientific horror to reveal how virtual physics can produce hilarious results«. Which is to say that when people are faced with incongruities – even when these incongruities are working hand-in-hand with ad hominem attacks – they often cannot help but laugh. Yet, while an act of ridicule may contain an incongruity – GLaDOS snipes at one point, »A somersault is just falling over in style. Congratulations on being clumsy« – incongruity is not requisite for ridicule to insult or cause pain. Incongruity theory, that is, cannot fully account for ridicule's shiftiness at the pleasure-pain nexus. The next theory – known as the relief theory of humor – is better suited to illuminate this quality of ridicule.

Relief Theory

While the incongruity theory falls short of examining why some people find a particular joke or gag humorous and others do not, the relief theory plumbs the psychological implications of jokes and joking. A gamer unnerved (rather than motivated) by GLaDOS' ridiculing, for example, may be upset by being constantly insulted and quit the game. According to relief theory, such lost interest may be less about feeling humiliated and more about an individual gamer's broad mental makeup; humor is part of a person's psychology, something that occurs as an internal reaction to external phenomena. First outlined by Herbert Spencer (1860) in a short, seven-page article titled *The Physiology of Laughter*, relief theory was later extended and championed by Sigmund Freud

in several works, most notably his 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. For Spencer and Freud, humor verges on being a bodily function: laughter is expelled nervous energy resulting from the recognition of unconscious thoughts brought to the fore by some external trigger, whether physical or linguistic. Laughter occurs, that is, when the laugher recognizes that the self is contradictory, inconsistent, or incongruous, and thus the laugh is the sound of recognition, of the laugher realizing, perhaps nervously, that he or she has not conformed to some social norm or convention despite protestations otherwise. In *Jokes*, Freud primarily concerns himself with two types of jokes, which he terms the »innocent« and the »tendentious«. While »innocent« jokes are mostly plays on words, »tendentious« humor almost always involves some element of ridicule. Freud (1963) writes: »there are only two purposes that [tendentious humor] may serve: It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense), or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)« (ibid., 97). Depending on the social circumstances, hostile and obscene jokes allow fun to be had with that which etiquette and propriety would forbid. Laughter occurs because the repressed or the taboo has been revealed or articulated through the joke, resulting in a sort of double-voiced laugh: seemingly a laugh at the object drawn attention to, which really is the self laughing at its own unacknowledged notions held in check by a superego prohibiting that which is deemed indecorous. In a sense, then, the laughter of relief theory reveals the laugher recognizing that he or she embodies ridiculousness and acknowledges belief in a contradictory, hypocritical, or untenable subject position.

An example of relief humor occurs early on in Portal 2, just after GLaDOS temporarily supplants Wheatley as host to Chell. As Chell enters a redirection stage, GLaDOS comments: »Did you know that people with guilty consciences are more easily startled by loud noises…«. A train horn then sounds, after which GLaDOS continues: »I'm sorry, I don't know why that went off. Anyway, just an interesting science fact«. The humor here works on several levels. While part of the humor is GLaDOS' deadpanned feigned apology – »I'm sorry, I don't know why that went off« – the main gist is the implication that Chell (and by extension, the gamer) possesses a guilty conscience for .for the damage she did in the first game in the Portal franchise. GLaDOS sets up the gamer to remember past (mis)deeds, then intends to startle her or him into recognizing the presence of guilt by sounding the incongruous train horn (»incongruous« since a train would be out of place in the Aperture Science Enrichment Center). If the gamer is startled, the humor is relief and the laughter double-voiced – first, anxiously, at the sound of the train horn and, second, nervously, at the recognition that

she or he has a guilty conscience (perhaps for playing a game rather than, say, working on a pressing grant proposal).

What makes this moment in Portal 2 a species of ridicule is that what initially seems to be just a slightly derogatory tease that insinuates the player has a guilty conscience, almost instantly blossoms into a case of full-blown ludic worry, even if the gamer never played the first Portal, and/or felt bad about (seemingly) doing away with GLaDOS. Like an Althuserrian »hail« in which an innocent person is made to feel like a criminal when a police officer yells, »›Hey, you there!‹« (1986, 245), GLaDOS' »interesting science fact« here works the same way, causing players to wonder not ›*did* I do something wrong‹, but rather, ›*what* did I do wrong?‹ The recognition that the game is so actively attempting to manipulate the player's mind – to cause the player to self-ridicule, to participate in a kind of emotional enthymeme – has surely delighted many gamers (it certainly did us). More important for this chapter, however, is that this moment – like many others in the Portal franchise – fits the basic tenets of relief theory and shows how ridicule can elicit pleasure. The player here is made to feel awkward because GLaDOS has named the elephant in the room: »you tried to kill me before«. She then follows this up with language spoken in a tone that implies this »interesting fact« is water under the bridge. Thus, there is relief that truthfulness and forgiveness are imminent, yet this relief creates a reciprocal tension because (given GLaDOS' history and the conventions of the survival horror genre of which the Portal franchise is an example) players know that there is something terrible behind GLaDOS' calm exterior. Pain and pleasure coexist here, a ludic experience catalyzed by a simple, off-handed »science fact«.

While much that passes as ridicule can fit under the heading of relief theory, however, this theory still cannot account for a number of ridicule's other effects, particularly its more overtly hostile ones. For that, we turn to the superiority theory of humor.

Superiority Theory

As noted above, the superiority theory of humor, as first formulated by Thomas Hobbes, more fully allows for ridicule as it is conventionally understood (i.e., hostile, condescending epithets and accusations) as a type of humor than the other two theories we have discussed. As such, it is probably the best single theory to use for understanding the most overt humor elements in the Portal franchise, especially the harshest remarks made by Wheatley and GLaDOS. According to Andrew Stott (2005), superiority theory presumes that »laughter is always antagonistic and conflictual, establishing a hierarchy at the mo-

ment of pleasure« (ibid., 133). In his 1640 publication *Human Nature*, Hobbes asserts that laughter is a »sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly« (2008, 54-55). Later, Hobbes identifies that which is likely to result in an observer experiencing »sudden glory«: people laugh »at the infirmities of others wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated«; »at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all«; and at jokes or wit that »always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity or another« (ibid., 54). As conceived by Hobbes, superiority theory revels in the »infirmities« or deformities, in the »mischances« and misfortunes of others, as something inherent in certain persons and things. Indeed, a requisite of superiority theory is that some persons and things are unavoidably ridiculous, especially to those who see the world as inherently inferior to them. GLaDOS, of course, constantly ridicules from a position of superiority, one that presumes Chell to be far inferior – even in relation to other test subjects (mentally and physically) – as well as noncompliant with Aperture Science's behavioral norms – assessments routinely surfaced in Wheatley's and GLaDOS' questioning of Chell's intelligence (especially given her purported brain damage), her weight, and her violent, disruptive behavior. Superiority humor taxonomizes and divides people. It presupposes hierarchical inequities, and although such humor often revolves around a person's misfortune or deformity, it is not – according to superiority theory – those features that make people laugh. Rather, it is about the laugher's »sudden glory« or epiphany that she or he does not share in an alleged misfortune or deformity. As Stott (2005) observes,

> »there are types of humor that depend on a feeling of superiority for their operation. Racist and sexist jokes, for example, presume an ethnic, gendered, and intellectual advantage on the part of the teller and his audience« (ibid., 134).◀10

Thus, bullying ridicule operates (according to Hobbes) such that in dominating the bullied, the bully feels a »sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency« in relation to »the infirmity« of the bullied, resulting in what Larry K. Brendtro (2001), in a study of playground bullying among children, calls the bully's »inflated sense of self-esteem« gained from »putting others down« (ibid., 48). Near the end of Portal, for example, GLaDOS – in response to the player's desperate attempt to destroy her – says:

> »Neurotoxin... [cough]. So deadly... [coughs]. Choking.... Hahahaha....I'm kidding. When I said ›Deadly Neurotoxin‹, the ›Deadly‹ was in massive ›sarcasm quotes‹. I could take a bath in this

stuff, put it on cereal, rub it right into my eyes. Honestly, it's not deadly at all. To me.... You, on the other hand, are going to find the deadliness a lot less funny«.

Clearly superiority theory excels at explaining how humor – particularly when it is pejorative – can be pleasurable. Like the incongruity and relief theories, though, it has its limitations, particular in a comedic context as complex as that found in the Portal games. Individually, each of these theories of humor help to explain how ridicule can be pleasurable under certain circumstances. Collectively, they suggest that there is a point within a given ludosphere in which the concomitant play elements of pleasure and pain are perfectly balanced. In the remainder of this chapter, we integrate these three theories' contributions to understanding humorous ridicule, focusing in particular on how ridicule is able to both injure and delight. We also return to our earlier argument that ridicule is a game mechanic, not just in the Portal series but in all games. But first, we want to parse more deeply what is meant by ›ridicule‹.

The Dynamics of Ridicule

Ridicule functions variously and serves multiple ends, but foremost it is a mechanism for attempting to control and regulate human thought, behavior, and language-use. As it calls attention to some social norm or ideological formation that its subject is perceived to have transgressed, it is disciplinary. The subject is to heed the ridicule, then alter her or his behavior, language-use, or the like so as to conform to the implicit argument expressed by the ridicule. While ridicule is often thus employed by a hegemon to affect conformity or compliance with social norms, it can just as well be issued to challenge or contest some norm or ideological formation.

Moreover, ridicule is a device for teaching or norming people to being ridiculed as well as for testing convictions. Tricky as it is to effect, ridicule can also be used to motivate subjects, which is perhaps the main intent or madness of GLaDOS' method, as Wheately suggests: »Alright. So that last test was...seriously disappointing. Apparently being civil isn't motivating you. So let's try things *her* way...fatty. Adopted fatty. Fatty fatty no-parents«. Finally, as noted earlier, ridicule is not particular: its function and effects depend on a wide range of factors – from who ridicules whom to whether its subject understands the ridicule's intent as well as chooses to comply, ignore, or challenge it. Ridicule, in other words, is highly subjective.

According to Aristotle, ridicule is always rhetorical, a means of persuasion, although he defines and treats ridicule differently depending on how it fits the aim of a particular text. In *Poetics*, for example, Aristotle sees ridicule as an element of comedy and thus helps signal what qualifies as comedic: »›the ridiculous‹ [...] is a subdivision of the category of ›deformity‹. What we mean by ›the ridiculous‹ is some error or ugliness [...]« (Aristotle 1981, 9). Here »›the ridiculous‹« is defined as inherent in a subject, as an appearance of »error or ugliness«, which are more or less relative evaluations dependent in meaning upon some sort of cultural norm or standard as well as on the perspective of the subject declaring the object ridiculous. That is, according to Aristotle's formulation, there exists the ridiculous – »naturally« deformed, flawed, or ugly subjects – and the non-ridiculous – whatever conforms to or fits the norm; this is the basis of the superiority theory of humor discussed earlier. »You're [...] ugly«, GLaDOS tells Chell. »I'm looking at your file right now, and it mentions that more than once«.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle enumerates methods of ridiculing, examines ridicule as a means of persuasion (primarily in a legal context), and warns of its ability to unduly sway an audience. According to Aristotle, ridicule involves »laugh[ing], mock[ing], or jeer[ing]« as a means of both »show[ing] contempt« to »inflict injuries« and »stir[ring]« people »to anger« (Aristotle 2004, 62-63). Ridicule here is a means of persuasion because it acts upon the emotions of either or both the object of the ridicule and those who witness or hear the ridiculing act. However, since »[t]he Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments« (ibid., 60), Aristotle warns, ridicule can be dangerous as it may cloud reasoning: people too often allow »themselves to be so much influenced by feelings of friendship or hatred or self-interest that they lose any clear vision of the truth and have their judgment obscured« (ibid., 4). Thus, as a persuasive act, Aristotle suggests, ridicule can be used to appeal to and arouse emotion sufficiently to cloud clear thinking as well as to obscure and warp judgment. This mechanism is clearly at work throughout the Portal franchise – »You're angry«, GLaDOS presumes. »I know it«.

In ludic as well as suasory contexts, if ridicule can affect judgment, it can also affect behavior. Here again, it is clear how ridicule routinely – and purposefully – works as a game mechanic. In Portal 2's commentary node«, the game's designers reveal that ridicule is intentionally a part of the overall fabric. As an Aperture Science tester, GLaDOS' role is not just what Valve designer Matt T. Wood describes as »holding the player's hands a bit«◂11

to guide the player through the various puzzles; her operating system's code includes ridiculing the player, a code that was later revised to accommodate

gamers. Although »GLaDOS originally was a lot more cutting in [the] opening rooms«, according to developer Elan Ruskin,◂12 »Playtests revealed [...] that it was a bit grueling getting brow-beaten by GLaDOS [...] early in the game, so her arc was rewritten to give her more of a slow burn towards the player«. However, late in the game, when GLaDOS and Chell assume the role of »buddy cop partner« to each other against the »new threat« that is Wheatley, as Portal co-author Jay Pinkerton◂13 puts it, »dry, robotic supervillain GLaDOS« becomes »more human and relatable«, which »ended up being one of the hardest writing jobs in the game«. Thus, when the game constructs situations and experiences that impact how a player's judgments are converted into ludic behaviors by introducing fluctuations at the pleasure/pain nexus – delivered by (or experienced through) the game's other components like plot, art, music, script, voice acting, rewards, puzzles, interface, and so forth – it effectively serves as a method or rule by which the play of the game unfolds – i.e., it is a game mechanic.

It is also worth pointing out that although ridicule's general purpose (or at least consequence) is to elicit ›negative‹ emotions (emotions that, initially at least, are derogatory), the type of negative emotion (and its subsequent impact on behavior) varies based on factors such as degree (the ridicule's perceived intensity) and the subjectivities of the persons involved (power inequities). As Aristotle describes in *Rhetoric*, ridicule »either attacks or defends« in forensic contexts, or »praises or censures« in ceremonial situations (2004, 13). In a ludic space, ridicule may work in any or all of these ways, and in the Portal series it goes further by situating players such that they must actually learn to take pleasure in being attacked and censured in order to win the game. Yet, the Portal games also offer occasional praise, the function of which is not just to reward the player but also to prod the player on to the next task. In Portal 2, for example, Wheatley offers, »Have I ever told you the qualities I love most in you? In order: number one: resolving things, love the way you resolve things. Particularly disputes. Number one, tied: button-pushing«. As a device that can elicit ire and pleasure simultaneously, ridicule – especially in the Portal games – is thus a means of self-reproducing play: as players respond to the ire generated by the in-game ridicule, they concurrently advance the gameplay by refuting the ridicule through defiant acts. Players, in essence, respond: »You may think I'm fat, but I'll still solve this impossible puzzle and humiliate you«. This is the engagement cycle that keeps players – in this and other games – either moving forward or quitting.

The idea of taking pleasure in ridicule – what we earlier referred to as *catagelophila* (cata = Greek for ›put down‹; gelo = Greek for ›laugh‹) – is hardly exclu-

sive to games. As Aristotle famously observes in *Poetics*, both tragedy and comedy work on the emotions to affect catharsis (288). Comedic catharsis, Martha Nussbaum (2001, 390) contends, is a »clarification«, one that does not depend exclusively on the intellect but can be generated by emotion as well. Whereas in *Rhetoric* Aristotle insists ridicule is a form of persuasion that can trouble emotions sufficiently to cloud clear thinking, in *Poetics* ridicule becomes a means of experiencing catharsis, a cleansing. If ridicule in comedy is to arouse indignation in an audience, and if that indignation concerning human behavior is to result in catharsis or cleansing, then clearly Aristotle is suggesting that audiences will recognize that in order to escape ridicule one must simply avoid the behaviors that elicit it. That is, what is clarified is what *not* to be or *not* to do in order *not* to be laughed at or ridiculed. In this way, Aristotle's comedic catharsis, enabled through acts of ridicule, becomes either a means of enlightening an audience about what is and is not proper behavior, or a means of affecting, controlling, and regulating behavior, a vehicle for »urging a course of action« (Aristotle 2004, 35). Implicit in this formulation is that, to draw from *Poetics*, a »vulgar« audience incapable of appreciating »the proper tragic pleasure« (e.g., human overreliance on technology [Aperture Science] is bound to have severe unintended consequences) is to be treated with, and consequently swayed by, comedy (Aristotle 1996, lx-lxi). But for those unaffected by either tragedy or comedy, then ridicule becomes the default mechanism with which to sway an audience to a better set of behaviors. In other words, if the reality of a situation does not move one, nor does its absurd or awkward elements, then perhaps a cold jolt of humiliation will do the trick.

Importantly, Portal skips straight to ridicule, a decision that, at least within an Aristotelian framework, suggests that either the developers at Valve have a very low opinion of gamers (unlikely), or that the game they set out to produce was designed specifically to generate judgments and decisions derived from experiences of mockery and insult. As GLaDOS expresses to Chell late in Portal 2 after the two have teamed up to battle Wheatley, »We had a lot of fun testing and antagonizing each other and, yes, sometimes it went too far«. Ridicule as a game mechanic, then, is optimized to produce relational interactions – perfect for the interactive game medium.◂14

If ridicule is particularly habituated to eliciting reactions toward improvement, how then is GLaDOS herself to be understood as an agent of correction? Within the games' respective narratives, it would seem that the only reaction she wants (until the end of Portal 2 when she and Chell team up against Wheatley) is for Chell/the player to give up – »You may as well lie down and get acclimated to the being dead position«. But for Chell/the player to assume

that position would undermine the game's goal of sustaining player interest. GLaDOS and Chell/the player's relationship is ultimately symbiotic if not parasitic: they need each other, not just to complete the game but for the game to exist. GLaDOS implies as much by prolonging Chell's existence: »I was going to kill you fast. With bullets. Or neurotoxin. But if you're going to pull stunts like this, it doesn't have to be fast. So you know. I'll take my time«. It is here in this contradiction that the game medium's singularity of purpose – to keep the player interacting, staving off the boredom inherent in computer games (cf. Ruggill and McAllister 2011) – is distinguished from other storytelling media. This curious relationship between the ridiculer and the ridiculed raises a question about agency: as Aretha Franklin would say, »who's zoomin' who?«

The Subversion of Ridicule

Agency and its connection to reactive improvement are effectively addressed when one recognizes another use of ridicule, namely, as a disciplinary device for teaching proper mores and manners. In his 2005 book *Laughter and Ridicule: Toward a Social Critique of Humour*, Michael Billig (2005) claims that the main import of ridicule is its function as a disciplinarian, as a corrective: »ridicule plays a central, but often overlooked, disciplinary role in social life« (ibid., 5). To work out this theory, Billig draws extensively from an under-appreciated theory of humor – Henri Bergson's 1911 book *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. To Bergson and Billig, ridicule, and by extension laughter, is ultimately a social gesture, the function of which is to »correct men's manners« (Bergson 2010, 16). Ridicule achieves this aim, both Bergson and Billig emphasize, by creating conditions in which embarrassment, humiliation, and/or shame will arise. Moreover, shame and embarrassment must be learned, and so it is precisely the function of ridicule, argues Billig (2005, 218), to teach these two emotions. Fear of shame and embarrassment, in turn, results in people behaving appropriately:

> »Becoming a socialized member of society means more than learning how to behave in public. It involves learning how to laugh at those who behave inappropriately, for polite adults must be able to discipline the socially deviant with momentary heartless mockery« (ibid., 230).

In this configuration of ideas, the evoking of shame and embarrassment in the service of the maintenance of social order is the prime goal of ridicule. For Billig, then, ridicule is primarily a corrective, a disciplinarian.

Ridicule achieves this effect by eliciting laughter. As Billig puts it: »Laughter has a rhetorical character, for it is typically used to communicate meaning to others, rather than being a reflex reaction following a particular inner state« (ibid., 189). Bergson likewise stresses that ridicule's laughter is a »method of discipline or ›breaking in,‹« as laughter is »first and foremost a means of correction« (Bergson 2010, 69; 95). To avoid being laughed at, to avoid feeling shame, humiliation, and embarrassment as a result of being laughed at, people self-›correct‹ their behaviors: »laughter, by checking the outer manifestations of certain failings, thus causes the person laughed at to correct these failings and thereby improve himself inwardly« (Bergson 2010, 97). The laughter Bergson describes punishes, disciplines, corrects:

> »Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ›ragging‹«. (ibid., 69)

Because social codes, norms, and rules must be learned, ridicule and laughter are a method for teaching them: »ridicule is both a means of disciplinary teaching and the lesson of that teaching« (Billig 2005, 177). Parents, for example, use »the laughter of ridicule to exert control and to impose the codes of social living« on children (ibid., 199). Ridiculing and consequently laughing at some behavior is to be educational, a lesson, implying a way to be or act to avoid being laughed at, as well as, conversely, a way to be or act to gain praise as befitting some social code or norm.

Can it be said that GLaDOS and Wheatley are practicing ridicule in this disciplinary sense? It hardly seems so given that the win state of the game is to defy and defeat these machinic – if witty – monsters. In the Portal games, the ridicule only motivates resistance, as when a coach tells a player she is weak, or a conductor tells an orchestra that they are too incompetent to perform in public. At first, this seems to be a modest subversion of disciplinary ridicule, one designed not to elicit the turning over of a new leaf, but rather to prove the ridicule wrong. Upon consideration, however, it is clear that even in this particular situation, the person resisting ridicule is not escaping an imposed disciplinary pressure but, on the contrary, is accepting and amplifying it, in effect willingly becoming even more disciplined: »You think I'm lazy and dumb?«, the player implicitly asks. »I'll show you how wrong you are by working ten times as hard to be smarter than you«. Ludic ridicule, then, enjoys the remarkable advantage of being nearly impervious to subversion; it only disciplines on a sliding scale that contains no negative axis.◂15 This notion is most intriguingly ex-

plored by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, and a Collection of Letters* (1711). In this treatise, Shaftesbury, contrary to the interpretation of some commentators who impute that the Earl argued that »ridicule is a test of truth« (Aldridge 1945, 132), rather proposed that »ridicule is a means of testing people« – their cowardice, »gravity«, or seriousness (Anselment 1978, 10; 52). To withstand ridicule is to demonstrate conviction, fortitude, and bravery; to fold under its battery is to prove one's weakness. Of the several theories of ridicule outlined so far, it is this one that perhaps best explains the motivational relationship between the ridiculing antagonists of the Portal games and Chell, the determined player's avatar.

A Theory of Ridiculous Relativity

Whether or not ridicule is effective as a mechanism for affecting behavior, urging a course of action, or testing a subject's convictions can be determined in part by the nature and force of the ridicule itself, and also by the nature of the ridicule's target. As William Preston observes in *Essay on Ridicule, Wit and Humour* (1788), what any act of ridicule means is always a subjective matter. Preston discusses this notion at length; ridicule is not »something stable and certain« since »nothing in fact can be more variable and fluctuating in its nature«:

> »Things appear ridiculous or not according to the education, course of life, constitution and temper of the observer, which vary [according to] his [or her] notions of propriety, perfection and order[,] on the one hand, and of indecorum, defect and incongruity on the other. Virtue, religion, truth, honour, every thing [sic] serious and venerable, have and daily do become subjects of ridicule among certain unhappy classes of men. The vulgar will laugh at many coarse jests and indelicate allusions, while persons of a more happy education and refined taste will be shocked at such mirth as inhuman and indecent. One may receive as facetious observations what would offend his neighbor as daring impieties«. (ibid., 88-89)

Ridicule, in other words, is relative. Despite (perhaps even because of) this unpredictability, ridicule persists, sometimes to raise an entertaining guffaw, sometimes to evoke a humiliating laugh, and as often as not intended to produce the one while inadvertently conjuring the other. This interpretive complexity – combined with the fact that ridicule always carries with it an implied argument about the appropriateness of that which is ridiculed (e.g., »Only slobs belch at the table!« implies that belching is governed by rules of decorum)

– means that ridicule's chances of communicative misfire are often fairly high. For ridicule to work just right (that is, as the speaker intends) requires that the ridiculer have expert knowledge of the person to be ridiculed, of the social context of the behaviors being ridiculed, of the preferred alternatives to these reprehensible behaviors, and of the very particular context in which the seemingly ridiculous person performed the seemingly ridiculous behaviors. Misreading any of these cues can easily lead to the ridiculer becoming the ridiculed.

Here, too, the Portal games take full advantage of ridicule's social and comedic complexity (i.e., its relativity) by having a protagonist who never responds to the multitude of taunts tossed her way. GLaDOS and Wheatley generate ridicule, but they can never judge its impact. This construction is brilliant from a design standpoint because it greatly reduces the number of alternatives that the game system has to handle. Even though ridicule, as discussed earlier, is inherently relational and interactive, because Chell is always silent and because games are typically played to win, the designers are saved the trouble of addressing the infinite number of possible responses to the taunts of GLaDOS and Wheatley. Instead, the designers can count on the fact that players will either be antagonized by the taunts and keep playing – if only to spite GLaDOS and Wheatley – or will quit. Consequently, the games' script writers and programmers are able to avoid composing innumerable snarky retorts and game paths, and instead only have to deal with a single thread: the player continues playing.◂**16** This rail-logic means the developers can focus on character building (including humor, one of the games' clear strengths), instead of preemptively trying to second-guess what the player will do next. Chell's impenetrable silence thus becomes an easy comedic opportunity the designers frequently exploit, especially in Portal 2:

Wheatley: »Say ›Apple‹. Aaaapple. Simple word. Apple. Just say ›Apple‹.
Classic. Very simple. Ay. Double Pee-Ell-Ee. Just say ›Apple‹.
Easy word, isn't it? Apple. [...] Okay, you know what? That's
close enough«◂**16**
[...]
Wheatley: »Not much of a plan, if I'm honest. But I'm afraid it's all we have at
this point. Barring a sudden barrage of speech from your direction. Improbable. At best«.
[...]
GLaDOS: »Remember before when I was talking about smelly garbage standing around being useless? That was a metaphor. I was actually talking about you. And I'm sorry. You didn't react at the time, so I was worried it sailed right over your head. Which would have made this apology seem insane. That's why I had to call you garbage a second time just now«.

[...]
Wheatley: »Enough! I told you not to put these cores on me. But you don't
listen, do you? Quiet. All the time. Quietly not listening to a word I say. Judging me. Silently. The worst kind«.

Portal game writers Erik Wolpaw and Jay Pinkerton confirm as much in a 2011 *National Post* interview with Matthew Braga. Wolpaw comments that

»One of our rules for writing it [the game] was that we wanted to keep the focus on the player. So when something happens, we don't want the player to just be an observer – this mute witness to these other two characters having a conversation. [...] We wanted to always keep the focus on you and your relationship to whatever character, or characters, are around«. (Braga 2011)

As a result of this development focus on the relationship between the antagonists and the player via the silent Chell, acknowledges Wolpaw, the humor can be more concentrated even as the technical work necessary to produce the game is reduced:

»we kind of think of her [Chell] as the straight man. She's the player's surrogate, and she's also the straight man in this world. [...] And because games have a long tradition of mute central characters, we can actually have a straight man without having to write a lot of the straight man lines«.

Thus, ridicule's relativity – which is to say its complexity and wild unpredictability – is deftly arranged in the *Portal* games so that they retain their armor-piercing register even as – from a development and gameplay perspective – their ridicule is ultimately just a paper tiger.

Ridicule As Institutional Critique

Despite the fact that most commentators – and players for that matter – get understandably caught up with the ad hominem attacks of the Portal games, at least one commentator has importantly noted that Portal 2 aims wider with its ridicule than just badgering players. According to Griffin (2011), Portal 2's »meta-humor« – »jokes that implicitly or explicitly satirize and exaggerate aspects of the medium and player behavior« – offers a critique of the entire »creative process of game design«. In this way, GLaDOS represents game makers, as she constantly builds and tinkers with test-chambers while taking pleasure in discussing the process. The decayed bowels of Aperture Science itself, with their various »projects at particular phases of development«, reflect an »exaggerat-

ed comedy« of the »reiterative process[es]« of game development. Cave Johnson's ›promise‹ of »$60 to participating test subjects«, Griffin proposes, »is not arbitrary« but an »ironically prescient« comment »considering some of the inane outrage that gamers directed at Portal 2 once it shipped, who bellyached and moaned« that the game was »not worth full retail value [i.e., $60]«.◂18 But most relevant to this study of ridicule as a game mechanic is Griffin's claim that Portal 2's ridicule »criticize[s] a growing trend of positive reinforcement in games«. As evidence, he cites GLaDOS' comment to the Blue and Orange bots in the game's co-op mode:

»You did an excellent job placing the edgeless safety cube in the receptacle. You should be very – Oh wait. That's right, you're not humans, I can drop the fake praise. You have no idea how tiring it is to praise someone for placing an edgeless safety cube into a receptacle designed to exactly fit an edgeless safety cube«.

As Griffin observes, »many casual and mobile games« are bent on »coddling« players with »cacophonies of color, exclamation points, and kind adjectives and achievement points« and other banalities for what are essentially empty accomplishments – »You won the Super Bowl!«; »You saved human kind!«; »You are the Master of the Universe!« As this study of ridicule has demonstrated, the Portal franchise does not play this way – »The cake is a lie«. Portal and Portal 2 draw out, emphasize, and enlarge upon the various functions of ridicule implicit in and underlying all games, showcasing ridicule as an active game mechanic to the great pleasure of its many fans.

Conclusion

While the *Portal* series' use of ridicule is broad – from personal to institutional – the antagonists' ridicule is aimed primarily at the gamer. The ridicule has multiple ends, to be sure, but ultimately it functions to acclimate the player to ridicule, both suffering and perpetrating it. GLaDOS, Wheatley, Cave Johnson, and the various personality cores ridicule to elicit pleasure in an attempt to maintain and sustain player interest: by correcting and disciplining poor decisions, they help the player learn to complete difficult tasks; they ridicule to test the player's conviction; and, ultimately, the ridicule dares the player, motivating her or him to keep pressing onward.

Mike Oeming's 26-page comic *Portal 2: Lab Rat*◂19 suggests as much, noting that Chell was chosen to be the protagonist of Portal 2 for the same reason she was initially rejected as a test subject – her extraordinary tenacity: »Test

subject is abnormally stubborn. She never gives up. Ever«. Not programmed to coddle, GLaDOS aims »to hurt [Chell's] feelings in various ways« in order to test Chell's »emotional fortitude«.◂20 »Fantastic«, GLaDOS declares after Chell completes the first ›impossible‹ task in the first Portal game. »You remained resolute and resourceful in an atmosphere of extreme pessimism«. Similarly, in Portal 2 GLaDOS offers:

»You never considered that maybe I tested you to give the endless hours of your pointless existence some structure and meaning. Maybe to help you concentrate, so just maybe you'd think of something more worthwhile to do with your sorry life«.

In the Portal franchise, it is not that the cake, but rather that lies are the cake. Even in Portal's end credits, the player's tenacity is both celebrated and undermined, this time in song:

»This was a triumph.
I'm making a note here:
HUGE SUCCESS.
It's hard to overstate my satisfaction.
[...]
I feel FANTASTIC and I'm still alive.
While you're dying I'll be still alive.
And when you're dead I will be still alive«.

Arguably, this is a song about all games, a meta-commentary on play itself: no matter victory or defeat, success or failure, the game goes on even as players come and go. Recognizing this, it is fitting – one might even argue, crucial – to see ridicule not just as an amusing or annoying element in some games, but rather as a key element in all games. Without ridicule as a nuanced game mechanic, *skat* becomes card trading, chess mere turn-taking, and playing the dozens is equanimous dialogue. Without ridicule, the Portal series would simply be science.

Endnotes

01► For this and all subsequent dialogue from Portal and Portal 2, we would like to thank and acknowledge the invaluable service provided by Steven Mattison (AKA Ayelis) for *Portal: Game Script* (In: *GameFAQs* 22 Nov. [http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/934386-portal/faqs/50477/]; accessed 10 November 2014.) and oblivion from aoc for *Portal 2: Text Dump* (In: *GameFAQs* 22 April. [http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/991073-portal-2/faqs/62236]; accessed 10 November 2014).

02► In his definition of ›game balance‹ for *Technopedia.com*, Cory Janssen (n.d.) explains: »Game balance is a video game design concept where the strengths of a character or a particular strategy are offset by a proportional drawback in another area to prevent domination of one character or gaming approach«. Similar definitions may be found in Andrade, et al. (2006), Koster (2004) and Hunicke (2005), among others.

03► See also: FAQ. In: *Teachwithportals.com* [http://www.teachwithportals.com/index.php/faq/]; accessed 10 November 2014.

04► In fact, both Portal and Portal 2 garnered many Game of the Year awards, including from publications, venues, and organizations such as GamesTM, Eurogamer, Gamasutra, GamesRadar, IGN, Joystiq, Kotaku, MobyGames, British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), Game Developers' Choice Awards, Golden Joystick Awards, Good Game, and Slant Magazine. In virtually all of these awards, the games' insulting humor is consistently applauded.

05► *JoyReactor: Fun and Butthurt Everywhere*, [http://joyreactor.com/]; accessed 10 November 2014.

06► Underscoring ridicule's relativity, in 2011, a North Carolina man playing Portal 2 with his adopted daughter took offense at the game's comments about adoption, explaining: »It throws the question, the most ultimate question that the child is ever gonna have for you and it just throws it right in your living room« (Parent Angry over Adoption Joke in Portal 2.In: *GamePolitics* 18 May 2011, [http://www.gamepolitics.com/2011/05/18/parent-angry-over-adoption-joke-portal-2]; accessed 10 November 2014). The adoptive parent is quite right; Portal throws things – barbs, insults, slander – straight into players' faces, without apology. That is the nature of ridicule. Indeed, even when the games' antagonists try to be nice, they ridicule, including the sensitive topic of adoption: [Wheatley]: »What-what's wrong with being adopted? Um. Well... lack of parents, for one, and... also... furthermore... nothing. Some of my best... friends are... orphans....«. Unfortunately, the outraged adoptive parent seems to have missed the fact that it is not adopted children who are the ultimate target of this particular burst of ridicule. Rather, it is people who denigrate adoption, as is made quite clear by Wheatley's »some of my best friends...« remark, a locution with well-known racist overtones.

07► GLaDOS. In: *Giantbomb* 21 July, [http://www.giantbomb.com/glados/3005-722/]; ac-

cessed 10 November 2014

08► See endnote 7.

09► Notably, ridicule can also seem to defy inclusion in each of these theories, as will become clear.

10► Of all the characters in Portal 2, Core 2, an ›Adventure Sphere‹, most reveals what Stott (2005) identifies as »a feeling of superiority« based on a presumed gendered advantage. Endeavoring to woo Chell, Core 2 spews one demeaning compliment after another; while the intent is to flatter her, the presumption is that she is so gullible – and thus inferior to him – that she will kowtow to his entreaties. »Oh, hello angel. I guess I must have died and gone to heaven. Name's Rick«, Core 2 says shortly after first eyeing Chell. Later, in an attempt to show off his presumed masculinity, Core 2 remarks, »I don't want to scare you, but I'm an Adventure Sphere. Designed for danger. So why don't you have yourself a little lady break, and I'll just take it from here«. He also makes a number of objectifying remarks, including, »I gotta say, the view's mighty nice from right here«, »Situation's looking pretty ugly. For such a beautiful woman«, and the particularly creepy »All right, your funeral. Your beautiful-lady-corpse open casket funeral«. While Core 2's sexist humor reflects that of the superiority theory, it may just as well function according to the relief theory of humor for players who have similar presumptions about gender. For more on gender in the *Portal* games, see deWinter / Kocurek's chapter in this volume.

11► Wood, Matt T. (2011): Portal 2: Text Dump. In: *GameFAQs* 22 April 2011, [http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/991073-portal-2/faqs/62236]; accessed 10 November 2014.

12► Ruskin, Elan (2011): Portal 2: Text Dump. In: *GameFAQs* 22 April 2011, [http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/991073-portal-2/faqs/62236]; accessed 10 November 2014.

13► Pinkerton, Jay.(2011): Portal 2: Text Dump. In: *GameFAQs* 22 April 2011, [http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/991073-portal-2/faqs/62236]; accessed 10 November 2014.

14► In fact, Erik Wolpaw, one of the game's writers, has described a moment during playtesting when the designers realized that players were unhappy that GLaDOS did not recognize the player/avatar when GLaDOS is turned back on at the beginning of Portal 2: »The takeaway we had from that was that it wasn't Chell they were invested in – it was the relationship that they, as the player, had with GLaDOS« (Braga 2011).

15► Two possible exceptions to this imperviousness are quitting the game and cheating. In the former case, disciplining ridicule may yet be considered successful in that it motivates players not only to self-police but also to self-indict and self-penalize, removing themselves from the game space. Cheating, or the desire to, raises other concerns. Whereas some may cheat in response to having been ridiculed in order to seem to have self-corrected, others may cheat to avoid feeling emotions of humiliation or shame as a result of being unable to win fairly. Either way, this too may be understood to be effective disciplinary work catalyzed by ridicule; the player works out an alternative system of success under intra-ludic though perhaps not socially acceptable parameters. Ridicule thus guides the production of

a ludic subject through its pan-disciplinary power. From this perspective, it is not that ridicule *can* serve as a disciplining force: it is that ridicule *always* disciplines.

16► Technically, there are two options – keep playing and quit – but if the player quits, there is nothing to be done from the development side of things.

17► This quote comes from a particularly funny – read, »ridiculous« – moment early in the game when the designers actually make it seem as if the player can respond Wheatley's request to say »apple« by hitting the spacebar. It turns out, however, that in Portal 2 the spacebar makes Chell jump, not speak. For several exchanges, then, Wheatley (having also just informed the player that Chell may have »a very minor case of serious brain damage«) tries to get the player to speak, and the player – hitting the spacebar as per onscreen directions – instead jumps up and down, a response that seems to confirm for Wheatley that Chell does indeed have significant cognitive loss. This becomes a running gag throughout the game, something that would be difficult to achieve if the game were more open. A side proposition to be made, then, might be that a game's ludic openness [O] and its potential for being funny [F] are in inverse proportion to one another. Symbolically, we could state this as: $F = \propto 1/O$.

18► Hence, the joke within a joke of a photograph in an Aperture office of a yacht with a $60 price tag hanging from the picture frame, as if to ask players, »What do you expect for $60?«

19► Oeming, Mike (2011): Portal 2: Lab Rat. In: *Comicsalliance* 13 April 2011, [http://comicsalliance.com/portal-2-lab-rat-full-comic/]; accessed 10 November 2014.

20► GLaDOS. In: *Giantbomb* 21 July, [http://www.giantbomb.com/glados/3005-722/]; accessed 10 November 2014

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