

Hamlet's Portal: The Cake is a "lie i' the throat"

An Intertextual Interrogation by Eric S. Piotrowski
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*Why, look you there! look, how it steals away!
My father, in his habit as he lived!
Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!*

Hamlet
Act III, Scene 3

In a recent episode of *The Experience Points Podcast*, Michael Abbott discussed his hopes for student engagement with *Portal* by expressing a desire that some student could find significant links between that game and Hamlet. As a nerdy English teacher — who is always unable to resist academic challenges — I shall do my best to relate these essential texts in a meaningful way. Section epigraphs are from William Shakespeare's play.

For those who don't know: Mr. Abbott runs *The Brainy Gamer* website and podcast and, in his spare time, is an Associate Professor of Theater at Wabash College in Indiana. He recently introduced the video game *Portal* as a required text in select sections of the mandatory first-year course "Enduring Questions". In celebrating this bold attempt to fuse video games with traditional academia, I hope my work here will provide worthwhile food for thought. Thanks of course to Mr. Abbott, and also to Scott Juster and Jorge Albor from the EXP Podcast for the superb discussion which got me started.

Introduction: This was a "triumph of his pledge"

*The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;
And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.*

Hamlet
Act I, Scene IV

Beyond all else (at least thematically), *Portal* is an examination of existence and being. Chell's journey from birth to near-death and a transcendence of mortality crosses the paths of murder (possibly, depending upon the existential perspective one takes on GLaDOS' claim of being "Still Alive"), betrayal, sacrifice, and the agonizing axioms of self-preservation. Like the Prince of Denmark, she wrestles with the big questions of life, especially how to confront a powerful force that wishes her ill (and has sealed the fate of at least one who has come before).

Although Hamlet (and nearly everyone else) dies at the play's end, he is triumphant in his quest against the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". He exposes Claudius' treachery, and delivers justice to those who have wronged others (himself, it may be said, included). In a similar fashion, *Portal's* Chell quests to expose "something rotten" in Aperture Science's Enrichment Center. Driven first by self-preservation but eventually by something else, her duel with GLaDOS is no less existentially and symbolically dire than the final showdown between Hamlet and Laertes.

There are five central areas of congruence between *Hamlet* and *Portal*. The first concerns poisons in the ear, liquid and aural. The second relates to ghosts of the vanquished. The third regards facades and facsimiles as mirrors of truth. The fourth concerns madness and perception, and the fifth relates to philosophical notions of life and death.

1. Poison in the ears

Anon comes in a fellow, takes off his crown, kisses it, and pours poison in the King's ears, and exit.

Stage direction
Act III, Scene 2

The play-within-the-play is a crucial scene in *Hamlet*; Ophelia's line immediately following the mock-poisoning "this show imports the argument of the play" is metatextually acute. In revealing Claudius' means of removing his brother the King, Hamlet provides a symbolic keystone to the eternal struggle between words, thoughts, will, desire, and deeds. (Balzac referred in *La Peau de chagrin* to similar conceptions of *vouloir*, *pouvoir*, and *savoir*.) Thus the usurper's admission that "Words without thoughts never to heaven go" applies both to sin and salvation.

What are the words of GLaDOS if not a sublime poison for the ear? She speaks in a comforting way, trying to put us to sleep as is the King at the time of his death. The automaton's standardized coo is the lullaby, seeping into Chell's subconscious — as it is the script, all is well. "The Enrichment Center is committed to the well being of all participants."

There exists another element to the Ear Poison facet, to do specifically with usurpation. One of GLaDOS' primary fears, surely, is encountering an intelligence capable of challenging her own. Thus we have a symbolic arrangement in each text of concealment and fear: Claudius is to Hamlet as GLaDOS is to Chell. (We could, if time allowed, explore the linguistic implications of her name as kin to a computing shell. We might also explore the possible significance of both protagonist and antagonist as female characters.) Uneasy, as Shakespeare points out in *Henry IV Part 2*, lies the head that wears a crown.

2. Except the ones who are dead

This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to [Hamlet].

Horatio
Act I Scene 1

The very first scene of *Hamlet* brings us face to face with the ghost of the murdered king. He has a message for his son, which cannot be received by the royal guards (nor, presumably then, by the usurper Claudius).

We never see the ghost of what the developers called "The Rat Man", the mysterious individual who leaves behind cryptic messages for Chell (and anyone else unlucky enough to enter The Enrichment Center). Is he dead? Missing? Insane? We have no idea. We do, however know that he has failed — as GLaDOS lives, so proven is his inability to prevent her usurpation. Yet he, like the ghost king, offers warnings and guidance for the one able to effect justice to the usurper.

It's worth noting that some of The Rat Man's messages are literary in nature — references to Emily Dickinson's poem "The Chariot" and Longfellow's "The Reaper and the Flowers". More information on this and other intriguing matters can be found at the Wikipedia *Portal* article, which has been polished into a "Featured Article", among the best in the project.

3. I see you! Are you still there?

*the play 's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

Hamlet
Act II Scene 2

Hamlet realizes early on that he can trap his target in a web of deception, in the form of "the dumb-show". Artifice it is, yet the truth of the scene — Claudius' murder — speaks through the lie. Cold blood shines through playful

fiction, involving audience (as noted) through the fourth wall in a classic Shakespearean “all the world’s a stage” moment.

The world of The Enrichment Center is likewise a stage of several layers. Just-emptied conference rooms indicate the ephemeral proximity of an audience, observing Chell’s movements, successes, and failures. But when the façade is stripped away and she discovers the true (filthy) halls of Aperture Science, the nature of GLaDOS emerges as raw as Claudius. The dual meanings of “play” come vividly to life here.

And of course *Portal* provides a hole through the fourth wall as well: as the player, we are both watching and controlling Chell. If Aperture Science is something much deeper than what Chell first expected, then the revolutionary possibilities created by the Portal Gun demonstrate a depth of possibility far beyond what most people expect when they sit down to play for the first time. We peer through a gateway into possibility the way Chell gazes into herself. Orange and blue rings around our imagination, swirling like the fog on the ramparts as the ghost approaches Horatio and Marcellus.

4. It says so here in your personnel file

*He’s loved of the distracted multitude,
Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes*

Claudius
Act IV Scene 3

Madness is another central theme in *Hamlet*, from Ophelia’s break with sanity to the prince’s oscillation between paranoia and justified suspicion. (And what of poor Polonius?) His own mother advises him to stop seeking his father in the dust (and his uncle orders as much, lest he succumb to “unmanly grief”). Laertes has a good reason to hate Hamlet, and indeed by the end of the play it would seem that the prince — driven though he was by good intentions — has become (in GLaDOS’ words) “liked by no one”.

Claudius is responsible for the public perception of Hamlet, who is quite popular as the grieving son of a slain king. His PR campaign convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible for Ophelia’s madness, and killed Polonius with malice aforethought.

GLaDOS’ efforts are obviously less successful, since they hope to persuade the target itself. Her attempt to dissuade Chell — even to the last moment before destruction — is comical: “There was even going to be a party for you. [...] I invited your best friend the Companion Cube. Of course, he couldn’t come because you murdered him. All your other friends couldn’t come either because you don’t have any other friends.” We see the reflection of a murder theme (of someone against whom the killer should have had no dispute), and even a promise of refreshments not unlike Claudius’ offering of wine (poisoned, of course) during the final showdown.

5. We do what we must because we can

*For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause*

Hamlet
Act III Scene 1

Speaking of curiosity, you’re curious about what happens after you die, right? Guess what? I know! You’re going to find out first-hand before I can finish telling you, though, so I won’t bother. I’ll give you a hint: you’re going to want to pack as much living as you possibly can into the next couple of minutes.

GLaDOS

There is much to be said about Hamlet's immortal soliloquy and its relation to Chell's struggle against GLaDOS. Does the wicked AI even understand the concept of "not to be", given her status as "Still Alive"? How does she know "what happens after you die", anyway?

Her very presence as a Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System must give us a pause similar to Hamlet's; she exists in a netherworld between organic and non-organic life. From whose genes was she built, and how? Or does her name refer to the fact that she Operates — along with Disks — Genetic Lifeforms? Would this make her a godlike figure (which in some ways she surely is)?

By the end of the game, it would seem that GLaDOS is defeated, and Chell.. well, we don't really know. But as Hamlet says in Act I Scene 2, "I know not 'seem'." She fiendishly reveals how fantastic she feels, and how delicious — and moist — the cake is. (To whom is the cake, in fact, a lie? What connections might lurk between this paradox and the resurrection of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play?)

If nothing else, *Portal* challenges — in ways not completely unlike Hamlet — languid assumptions of our individual humanity. Had the young prince not lashed out, he might have spared Ophelia and Laertes and of course himself a great deal of pain and suffering. But that was not an option, because it would have meant lowering himself into an inferno of guilt as real as the one Chell is sent toward on GLaDOS' descending platform.

Likewise, if Chell had found a chance to escape without confronting her HAL-ish tormentor, would she have done so? I doubt it. Too much blood had been spilled for her to sit by quietly and allow such wickedness in The Enrichment Center. And in the end, it all worked out; GLaDOS is glad she got burned.

Might we not say the same about Hamlet?

Postscript

Oh yeah — the "lie i' the throat" bit is from Act II Scene 2. Hamlet says:

*Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?*