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Integrating Narrative and Design: A Portal Post-Mortem

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SPOILER ALERT!!

❖ Leave the room now if you hate spoilers





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Topics

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





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Why Should You Care?

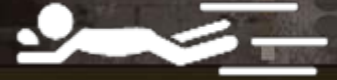
❖ Why should you care about Portal?

- 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.





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Why Should You Care?





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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.



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Our Narrative Philosophy

❖ Delta Theory

- Two Stories
 - Story-story
 - Gameplay story
- Lowering the delta will make your story more satisfying.





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Our Narrative Philosophy



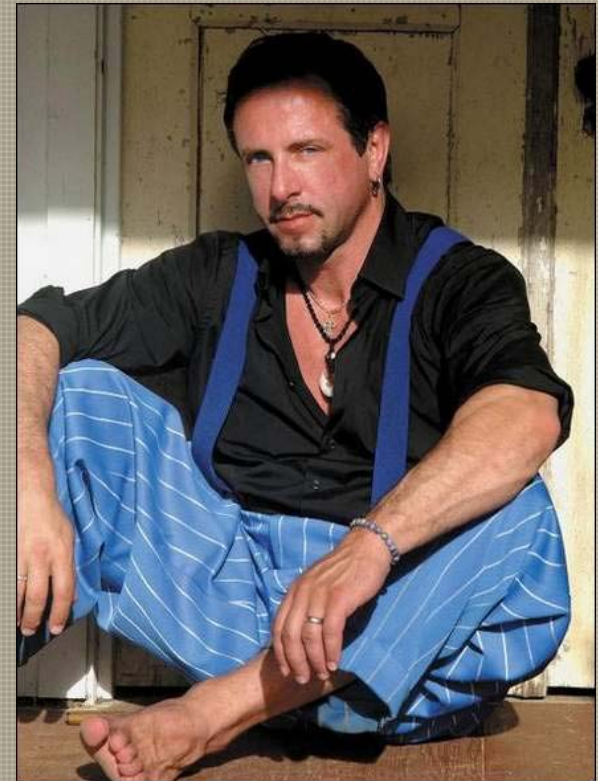
❖ Games with a high story delta:



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Our Narrative Philosophy

- ❖ Games with a high story delta:
 - Clive Barker's Undying





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Our Narrative Philosophy



- ❖ Games with a high story delta:
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Our Narrative Philosophy

- ❖ Games with a high story delta:
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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



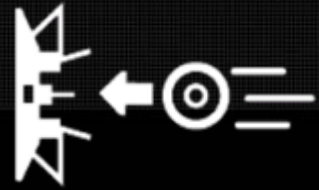


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Our Process

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





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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.



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Playtesting

❖ Playtest Early & Often





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Playtesting

❖ Advice!

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





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Playtesting





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Playtesting





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Playtesting

❖ The Advice

- Trust your instincts
- Remember initial reactions
- Don't despair
- Playtest!





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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



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Reflecting Story in Your Environment

❖ What we did

- Wall scribblings in the behind-the-scenes areas
- Quick, easy, and effective





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Reflecting Story in Your Environment





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Reflecting Story in Your Environment

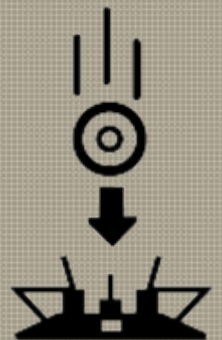




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Evolve Narrative Out of Gameplay

- ❖ Write to enhance what playtesters are feeling
- ❖ Keep the story wet
- ❖ Don't get too attached to anything





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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.

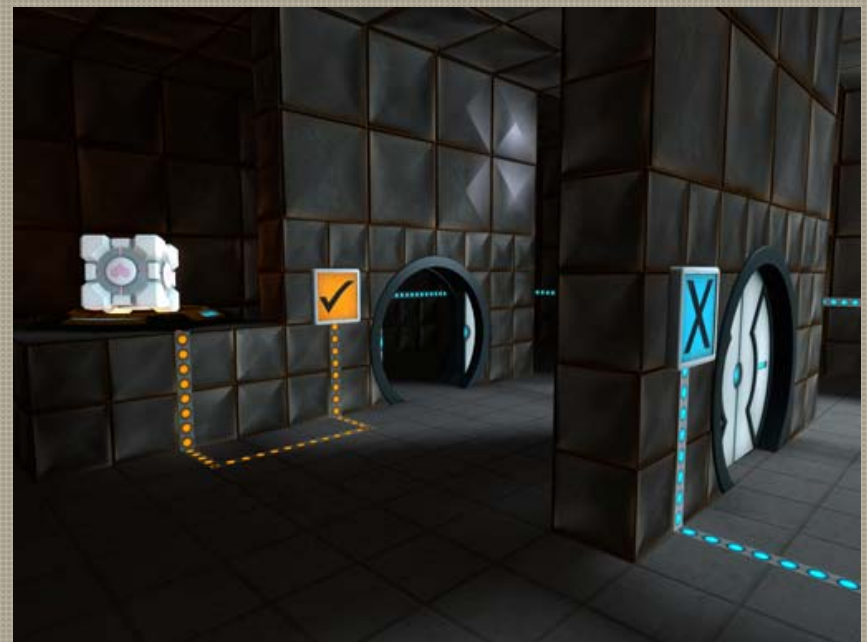
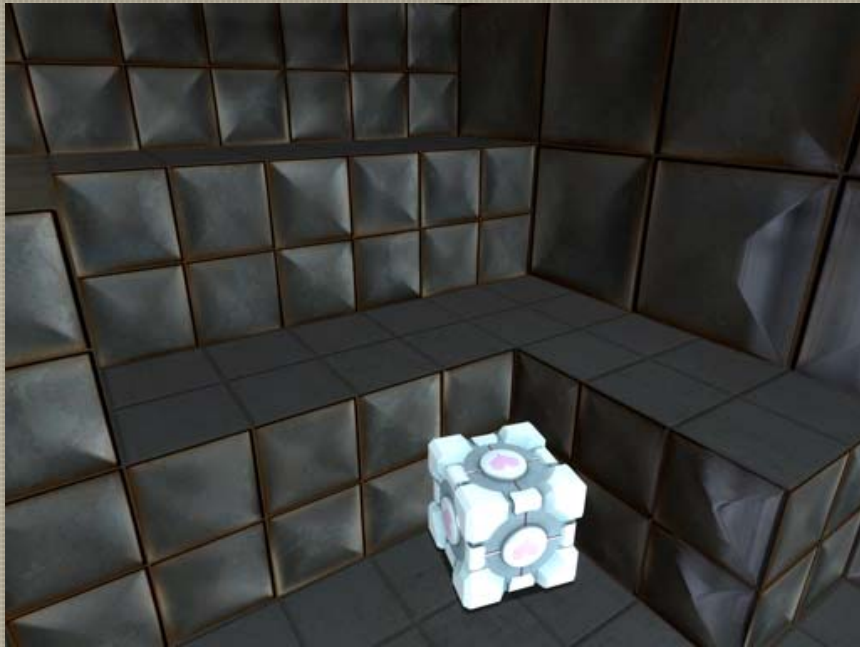
❖ Take Two

- Remove the lifts and the goo pit!
- Gameplay events where having the box is necessary.



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Example -- Weighted Companion Cube





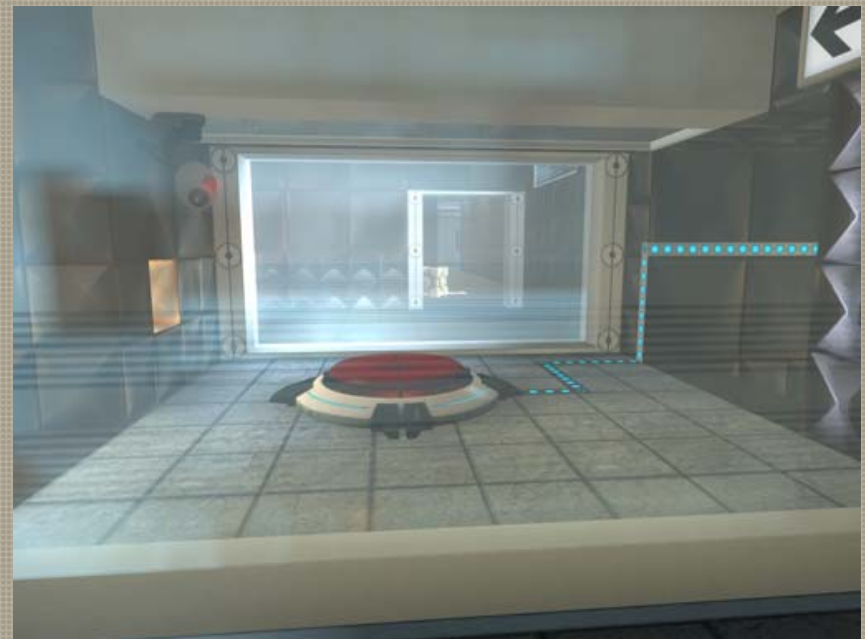
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Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

❖ Take Two

- Gameplay events
- Always see the button.





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Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

❖ Take Two

- Gameplay
- Always see the button.
- Still needed something else...





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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!!





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Example -- Weighted Companion Cube

❖ A Whole Lotta Love

- And the afterthought.
- Sometimes goofy ideas tend out to be really good ones.





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Piece D'Resistance

❖ Incineration Station – Boss Battle Training

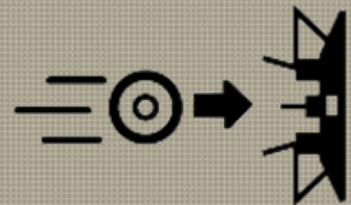
- Why it worked!
 - Perfect Training Location.
 - More Satisfying Level Ending.
 - Players Learn Better When Not Stressed.
 - Revenge!
- Example of gameplay influencing story, which then influenced the gameplay.



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Evolve Gameplay Out of Narrative

- ❖ Sometimes, gameplay isn't enough
 - For instance, the original ending of Portal
 - We were surprised, too





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GLaDOS Battle

- ❖ What does a Portal boss battle look like?
 - Obvious conclusion: A complex puzzle
 - Results: Pain
 - Other attempts:





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One

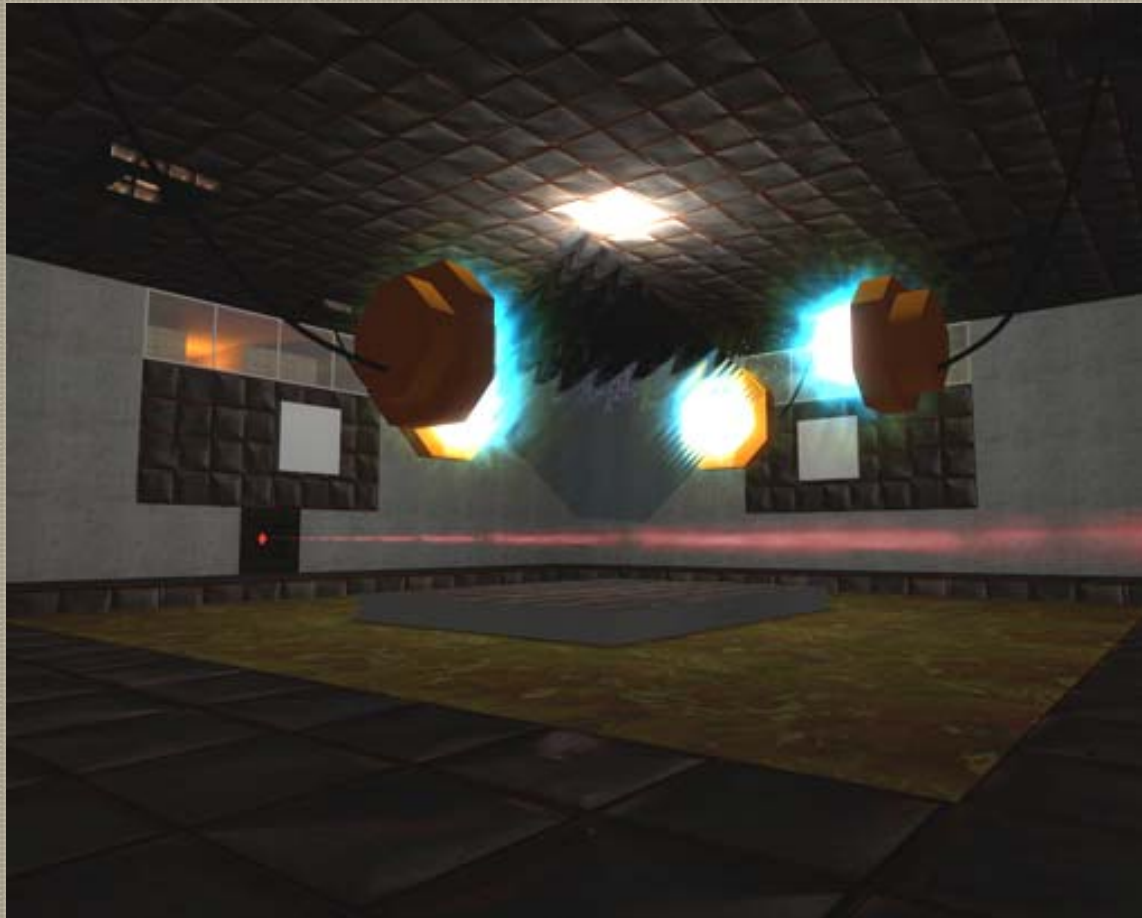




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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt One





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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.





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two

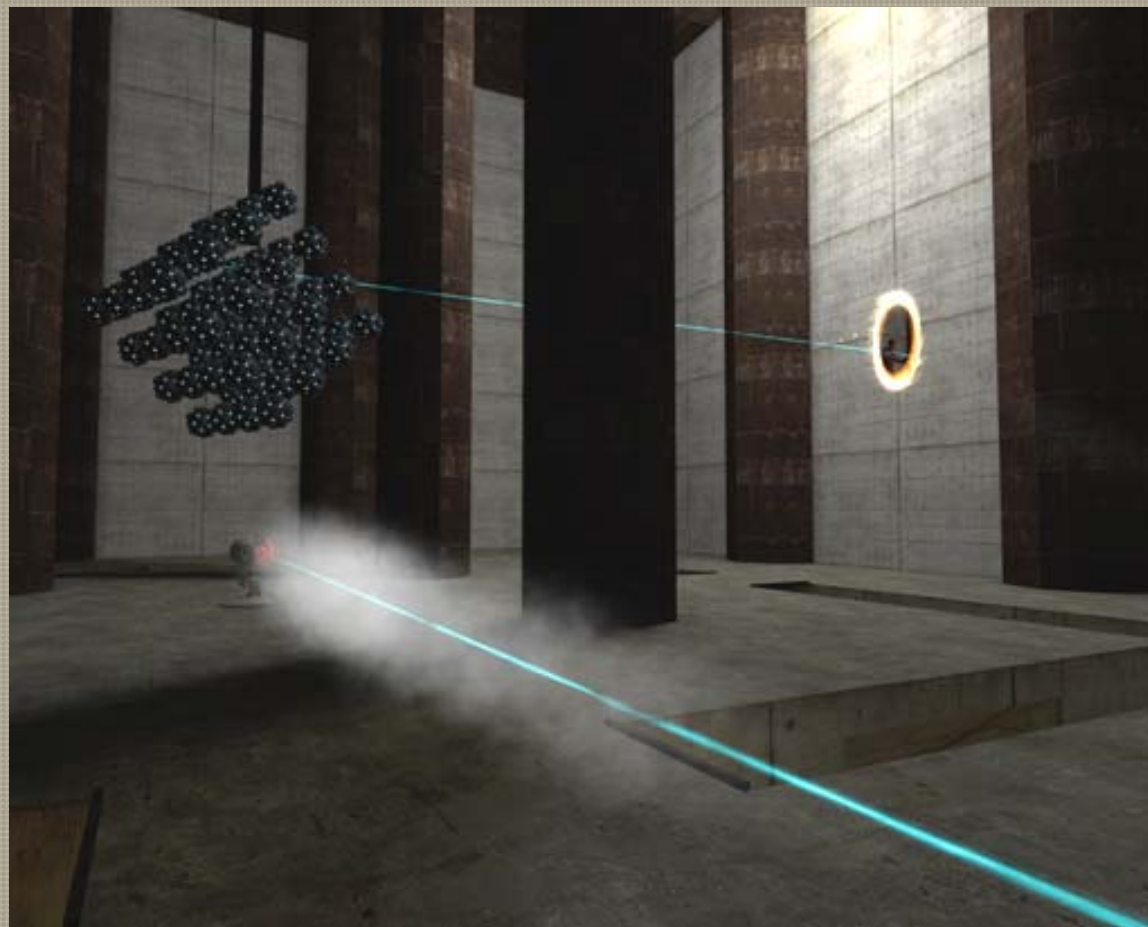




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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Two

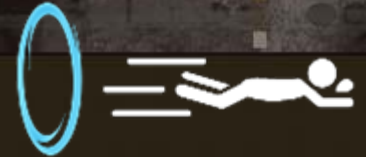
❖ Conclusion:

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





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three





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GLaDOS Battle – Attempt Three

❖ Conclusion:

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





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GLaDOS Battle

❖ Complex Boss Battle

- Nope.
- The more complex, the longer players would take, resulting in bad pacing.





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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





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GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt





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GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt

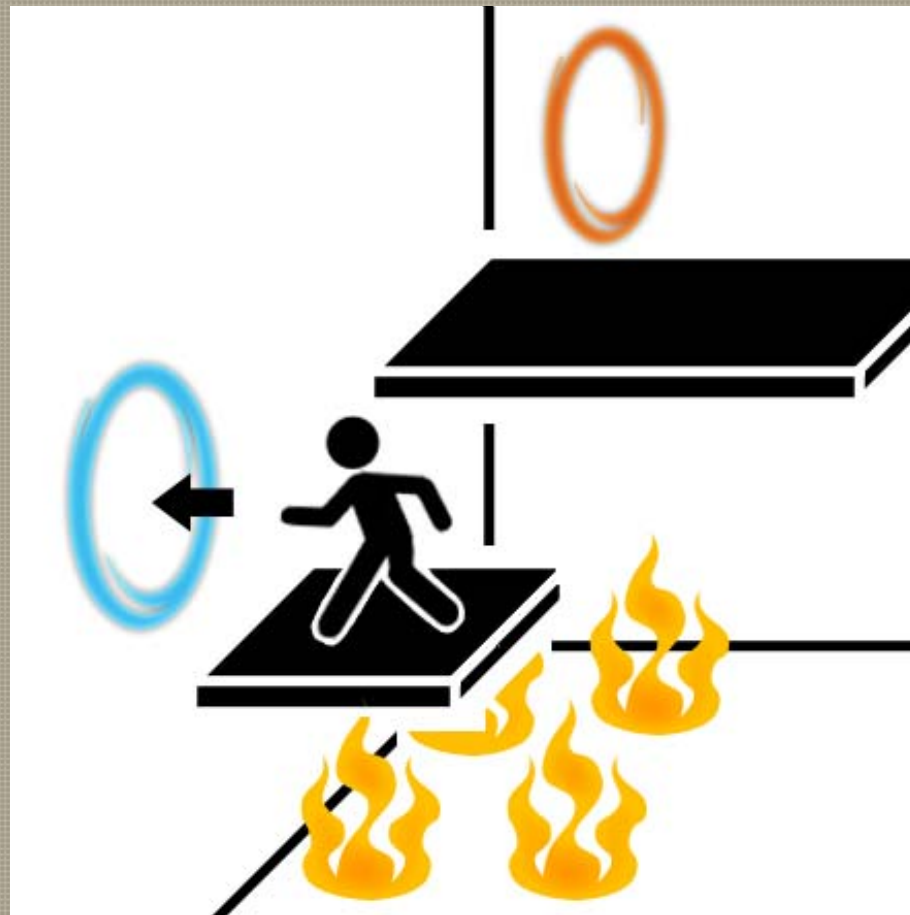


SENSE
This picture makes none



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GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt





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GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt

❖ What made the Fire Pit climactic?

- Time Pressure
- Visual Impact
- High Drama
- Easy Puzzle





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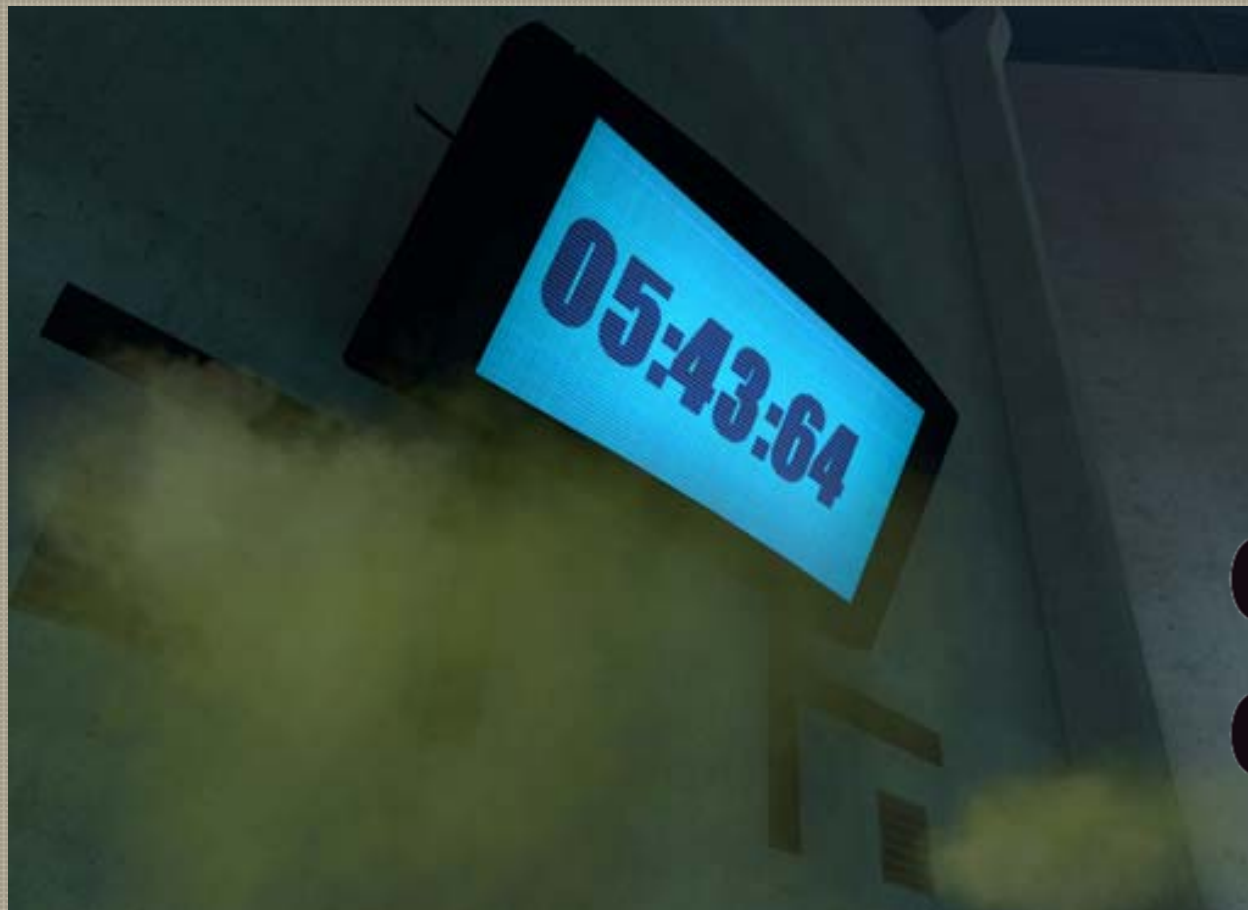
GLaDOS Battle – Final Attempt





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GLaDOS Battle – Time Pressure

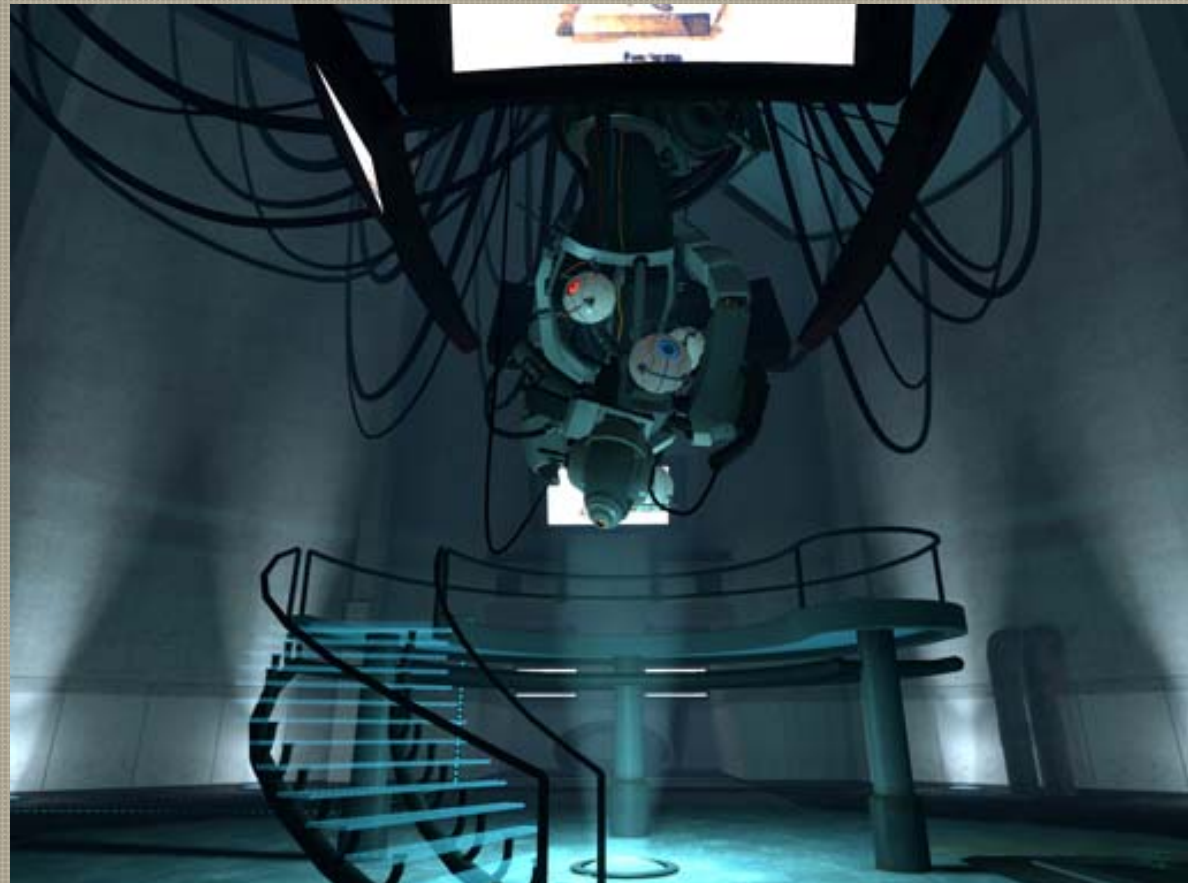




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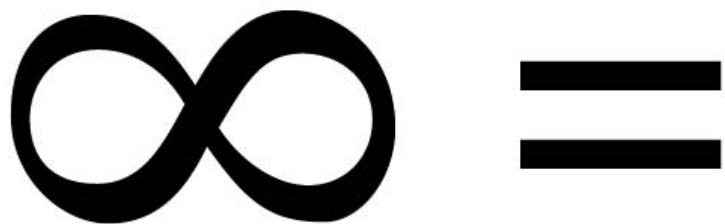
GLaDOS Battle – Visual Impact





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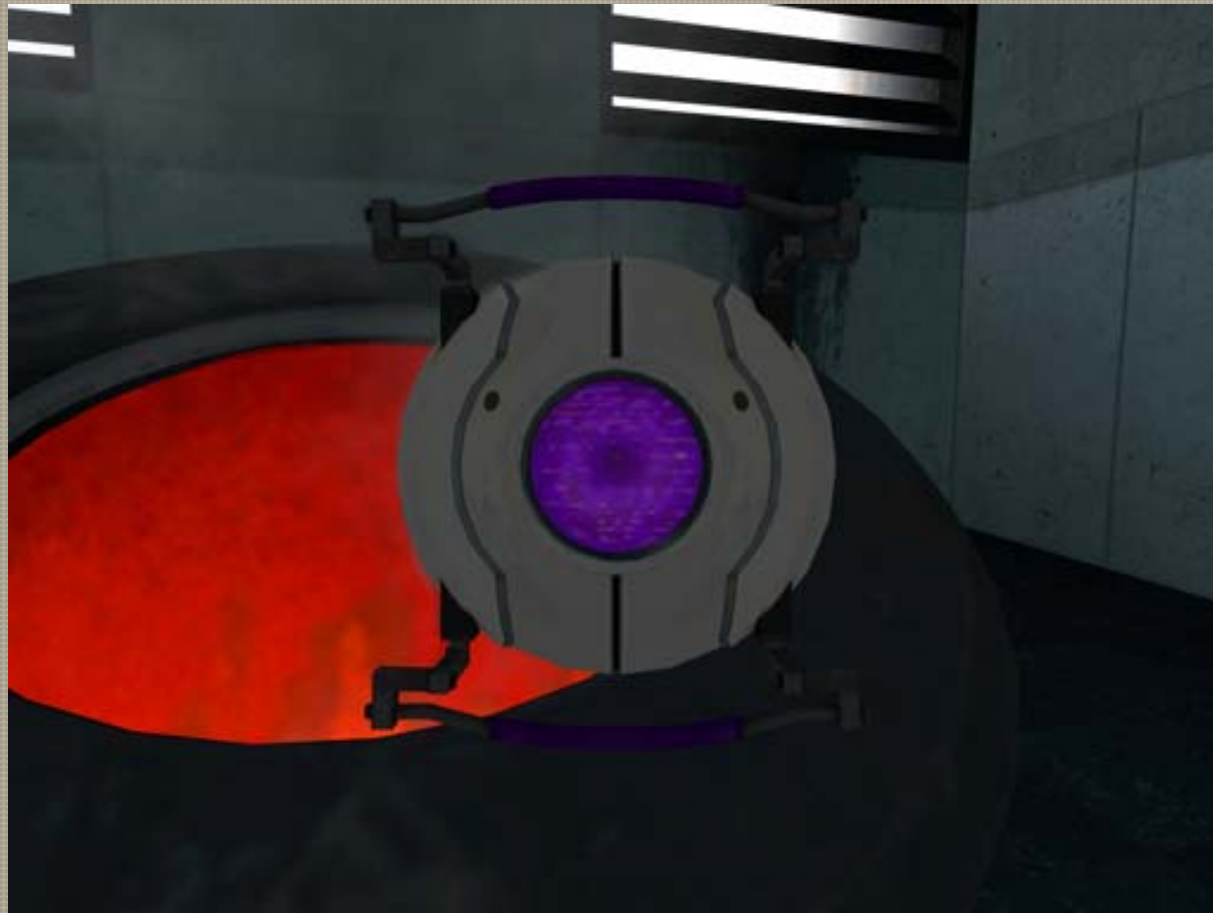
GLaDOS Battle – High Drama





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GLaDOS Battle – Easy Puzzle





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The End





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Take Away Slide

- ❖ Embrace your constraints as fuel for creativity.
- ❖ Have Faith!
 - In your writing
 - In the skills of your team
 - Playtest, playtest, playtest



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Questions? Comments?

