

Language in the Game *Portal*

'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!'

-Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

There is a commonly found flaw in the way people verbally speak with each other, and that is the assumption of intent. As seen with Alice, she assumes that the March Hare understands that the placement of the words “mean” and “say” should have been switched, with the conveyed message that every statement she makes is a result of what she thinks. Instead, she conveys the message that every thought she makes is a result of what she says. The flaws of assumption may also be reversed, whereby the listener assumes some hidden aspect of the speaker's words and subsequently acts under that assumption. A prime example would be the interaction of two characters in the video game *Portal*: the game player as a woman named Chell, and the artificial intelligence machine GLaDOS, with whom she interacts. Throughout the game, the individual player applies unstated meaning to GLaDOS' words. When GLaDOS' words do not coincide with the player's interpretation of them, the player concludes that GLaDOS is a liar¹ and therefore cannot be trusted. While GLaDOS is indeed a liar on two occasions as she makes false and intentionally deceptive statements, the player incorrectly assumes lies much more frequently, which fuels her completely negative views on GLaDOS and her drive to destroy the machine.

Portal's premise is simple: the player is evaluated for prowess, intelligence and resolve by successfully completing a series of nineteen test chambers of increasing difficulty.² The tests are administered by GLaDOS, who also gives verbal directions, statements, and hints. However,

1 Lie – n. – a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive; an intentional untruth.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=lie>

2 See Appendix A for a more detailed summary of the game.

as the game continues, the player determines that GLaDOS wishes to kill her, as she is placed in deadly situations and is given seemingly false and contradictory statements. What follows is an analysis of GLaDOS' statements and an explanation of how misunderstanding plagues the player.

Let us first explore assumption and its dangers. Take geometry's incidence axioms, for example. Incidence axiom 1 states that for every two points, there exists a line incident with the two. However, from this axiom alone, it should not be assumed that for every line, there are two lines incident on it. Assuming that statement, incidence axiom 2, is the same as incidence axiom one, would be similar to equating Lewis Carroll's statements on meanings and saying mentioned earlier. It is a fallacy to assume that “say what I mean” is the same as “mean what I say.”

The same cautions should be applied to the player of *Portal*, who frequently makes faulty assumptions. Take for example test chamber 8, in which the player assumes the unstated and thus believes GLaDOS to be suspect and erratic. This is due to the context and unusual statement of the following statement: "In dangerous testing environments, the Enrichment Center promises to always provide useful advice. For instance, the floor here will kill you. Try to avoid it." Here, the player believes the statement is redundant and not useful; she already assumes from her vision and a previous statement by GLaDOS that the floor is deadly. Having entered and viewed the floor from an elevation, the player saw a suspicious-looking liquid on the ground, and assumed that it was dangerous, though there was no concrete evidence that it was indeed deadly. Then, GLaDOS stated the following: “Please note that we have added a consequence for failure. Any contact with the chamber floor will result in an "unsatisfactory" mark on your official testing record, followed by death.” Combined with the visual of the floor, the player assumed “followed by death” meant that contact with the chamber floor, which was deadly, would lead directly to death. However, this was an assumption as it was not explicitly stated. There were two possible

interpretations: the first being that the acid on the floor was deadly, and the second being that contact with the floor would lead to an unsatisfactory mark, and the low mark would mean death at a later point. It must be explicitly stated that “the floor here will kill you” to confirm that the first option of interpretation is true.

Chamber 18 also makes the player incorrectly assume the nature of GlaDOS' character. Upon entrance, it is revealed that test chamber 18 is similar to test chamber 16 in that they both contain shooting androids. Because of this similarity, the player assumes GlaDOS is untrustworthy based on a previously made statement. Upon entering chamber 16, the character had been told, “Due to scheduled maintenance the next test is currently unavailable. It has been replaced with a live fire course designed for military androids.” With this knowledge, the player then inferred that chamber 18 was also a course designed for military androids and not humans. Therefore, GlaDOS must be trying to kill the player by placing her in an inappropriate area, and she cannot be trusted. However, the statement from chamber 16 should not be assumed true for chamber 18; GlaDOS never states that every test chamber containing shooting androids is not intended for humans. The idea is merely assumed by the player. For all intents and purposes chamber 18 may indeed be designed for human testing and the player's placement within is not a reflection of GlaDOS alleged murderous desires. If indeed GlaDOS is a murdering machine and placed the player in an inappropriate chamber without proper warning, the player has no rational reason to believe so

We shall now examine the two actual lies GlaDOS states, and the player's subsequent development of truths. Felipe Fernández-Armesto categorizes the idea of truth into four categories: truth felt, truth told, truth reasoned and truth perceived through the senses. The first category relies solely on emotion, the second is based on the sayings of others, the third is

determined by reason, and the fourth is perceived through the senses. In the context of the game, GlaDOS uses truth by reason; truth felt cannot be ascertained as the emotional capacity of GlaDOS is unknown, and there are no signs of truth told and truth perceived through the senses. However, the player as a container of emotions, senses and reason adheres to at least three categories of truth, which accounts for much more misunderstanding than previously explained.

The first of GlaDOS' lies is stated at the beginning of test chamber 5. GlaDOS states, "Due to a required test protocol, we will not monitor the next chamber." It is apparent though, that there are active, monitoring cameras. By reason and senses, the player sees the truth that GlaDOS performed a lie. Upon completion of the chamber, GlaDOS states "As part of a required test protocol, our previous statement suggesting that we would not monitor this chamber was an outright fabrication. Good job. As part of a required test protocol, we will stop enhancing the truth in 3, 2--." I have already revealed that GlaDOS gives another lie later in the game. Does this mean that the previous statement is also a lie? Not necessarily. Notice that the countdown is cut off; GlaDOS never begins the time where she will stop making false statements. However, the player assumes that the sentence is nonverbally completed with "1, now." This assumed sentence then becomes truth through emotion, through flawed reason, through flawed senses which tell the player the sentence is completed, and through the sayings of others (GlaDOS, though the saying was misinterpreted). Thus, the player is justified in believing that GlaDOS from then on will not lie.

The second lie is stated in test chamber 19, after the player has placed a cube upon a platform: "Congratulations. The test is now over." This statement is false, as the player has not yet exited the testing chamber (every testing chamber has a clear entrance and exit; passage through these is necessary for beginning and completing each chamber). Instead, the player is

lowered into a pit of fire with the following piece of advice: “All Aperture technologies remain safely operational up to 4000 degrees Kelvin.” The previous assumption that GlaDOS no longer lies is shattered, and the player then develops a new truth: GlaDOS lies, and thus cannot be trusted. The truth that “GlaDOS lies” is confirmed by emotion, reason and senses. Truth determined by the sayings of others is not included, but even if a contradictory truth under that category had been given, it would have been negated by the more numerous perceptions of truth that “GlaDOS lies.”

While it is established that GlaDOS lies, the player then makes several faulty assumptions and acts according to them. Because it is easy to work in absolute terms, the player takes “GlaDOS lies” and unjustifiably thinks “GlaDOS always lies, has always lied, and always will lie.” Yet, consider the end of the game. One of the final unresolved conflicts is the existence of cake; in chamber 15, GlaDOS states, “Cake and grief counseling will be available at the conclusion of the test.” However, chamber 17 reveals a side area which appears to be previously inhabited. On the wall is written “The cake is a lie.” With the assumption that GlaDOS is trying to kill the player, it seems plausible that the cake is indeed a lie, a ploy to make the player follow orders. Because the player does not trust GlaDOS, she escapes the facility, still under the impression that GlaDOS does not abide by her statements. A visual cut to a chamber within the facility however, reveals a black forest cake. GlaDOS has indeed procured a cake for in the event that the player successfully completes all test chambers. GlaDOS never intended to kill the player; she only intended to test the character for prowess, intelligence and resolve, as stated at the beginning of the game.

Language and the way it is understood is very fickle. As seen in the game *Portal*, assumptions of meaning may lead to incorrect understandings of words and statements, and thus

misguided actions. It is important then, to speak unambiguously and listen without prejudice, so that miscommunication does not occur, and one does not miss the opportunity to eat cake.

Appendix A

Further explanation of the tests: each chamber contains a cube and a platform upon which the cube must be placed. Obstructing the player are obstacles such as walls, vaporizing force fields, and uneven floors. The one tool the player is given is a “portal gun” which can aid in movement. With the gun, two types of portals can be created: a blue entrance portal and an orange exit portal. If the player goes into the blue portal, she will exit from the orange portal. For example: An entrance portal is created on the floor, and an exit portal is created in the ceiling. If the player steps into the entrance portal on the floor, she will drop down from the ceiling (the location of the exit portal).

Summary of notable events and statements in *Portal*

Test Chamber	Notes	Notable statements
5	Despite GlADOS statement that the test chamber would not be monitored, actively monitoring cameras are obviously placed around the chamber.	“Due to a required test protocol, we will not monitor the next chamber. You will be entirely on your own.” Upon completion: "As part of a required test protocol, our previous statement suggesting that we would not monitor this chamber was an outright fabrication.”
8	Floor is covered with acid.	“Please note that we have added a consequence for failure. Any contact with the chamber floor will result in an "unsatisfactory" mark on your official testing record, followed by death. Good luck!” "In dangerous testing environments, the Enrichment Center promises to always provide useful advice. For instance, the floor here will kill you. Try to avoid it."
15		Cake and grief counseling will be available at the conclusion of the test
16	Chamber filled with shooting androids	“Due to scheduled maintenance the next test is currently unavailable. It has been replaced with a live fire course designed for military androids. The Enrichment Center apologizes and wishes you the best of luck.”

17	Side area filled with rubbish and indications that another person had spent significant time there. Writing on the wall states “The cake is a lie.”	
18	Similar to chamber 16	
19	A platform lowers the character into a pit of fire.	"Congratulations. The test is now over. All Aperture technologies remain safely operational up to 4000 degrees Kelvin." Upon completion: “We are pleased that you got through the final challenge where we pretended to kill you. Put the gun down. Someone will bring you to the party.”
Beyond: corridors and the room that houses GlaDOS' core.	The player destroys a suspicious-looking object, which is actually GlaDOS' morality core. GlaDOS then proceeds to flood the building with neurotoxins. A resulting frenzy of destruction by the player apparently destroys the facility and GlaDOS. The player escapes. A visual cut then shows that GlaDOS is still alive and has a black forest cake.	“I'd just like to point out that you were given every opportunity to succeed.”

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