

3 STILL INSIDE CH

In Valve Software's 2007 game *Portal*, a young woman awakes in a sterile sleeping chamber. Her name, as we learn only in the game's closing credits, is Chell. She is silent, enigmatic. She has no knowledge of where she is or what is happening to her. But a mechanical feminine voice broadcasting from the speakers begins to guide her through the environment—an experimental research facility called the Aperture Science Enrichment Center. Aperture Science proves to be an underground node of the military-industrial complex, a private research institution for developing teleportation devices and other cutting-edge innovations.

Alone in the facility—there are no other humans in sight, only remnants of their former presence—Chell discovers that she has become a guinea pig of Aperture Science itself. She is a victim of corporate high-tech, the algorithms and protocols of innovation that are represented, bodied forth, by the mechanical voice luring her deeper into the facility. The voice promises freedom: “There will be cake.” The voice, as it turns out, is GLADOS, the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System that controls Aperture Science. Having exterminated the human scientists who formerly ran the facility, GLADOS now operates the research center autonomously.

GLADOS remains devoted to the mission of the center—namely, to advance portal teleportation technology. GLADOS is a figure for the unfettered progress of science, technics without human conscience. Like SHODAN before her, she personifies the machinic logic of containment and streamlined

control. Chell, on the other hand, represents the human subject as reshaped by the regime of corporate high-tech. A survivor of the day GLaDOS released a deadly neurotoxin throughout the building, Chell is revived from biostasis to beta-test the portal gun that GLaDOS has perfected without any human supervision or interference. But more significantly, Chell indicates the grassroots agency, the transformative potential of individual consumers or end users in the contemporary mediascape. For in requiring Chell to beta-test the portal gun, GLaDOS also provides Chell with the means of promoting change, modifying the infrastructures of the world in which she is trapped—altering it from the inside.¹

That is to say, the portal gun is a tactical instrument, an experimental apparatus—a symbol for *tactical media* as such. As the media theorist Rita Raley has written, “Tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible.” According to Raley, “Whether oriented toward systempunk or exploit, tactical media comes so close to its core informational and technological apparatuses that protest in a sense becomes the mirror image of its object, its aesthetic replicatory and reiterative rather than strictly oppositional.” It suggests a way of using the systems at hand, opportunistically, oriented less to an elsewhere than an elsewhere: “Tactical media’s imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal.”² The practices of tactical media aim not for escape but for internal dislocation, immanent critique, and the potentialization of a different future.

The portal gun enables Chell to literally modify the technoscientific environment surrounding her, that is, the material infrastructure of the research facility, by making temporary holes, tunnels, and invaginations. If GLaDOS instantiates the ideology of corporate technoscience, the portal gun instantiates the ambivalent condition of technical resources, shaped by profit motives but simultaneously affording mechanisms for interrupting, probing, or critiquing dominant cultural forces.³

As Chell attains greater competency with the portal gun—instructed by GLaDOS herself, conditioned by the puzzles that GLaDOS sets up to test the gun’s functionality—she eventually notices that GLaDOS’s control is not complete. There are limits, exploitable gaps in the system. Chell learns that at least one other person has escaped GLaDOS’s testing chambers, someone who has been living off the grid, finding the chinks in the world machine.⁴ The more she explores, the more she discovers breaks in the smooth surface of the architecture (fig. 3.1).

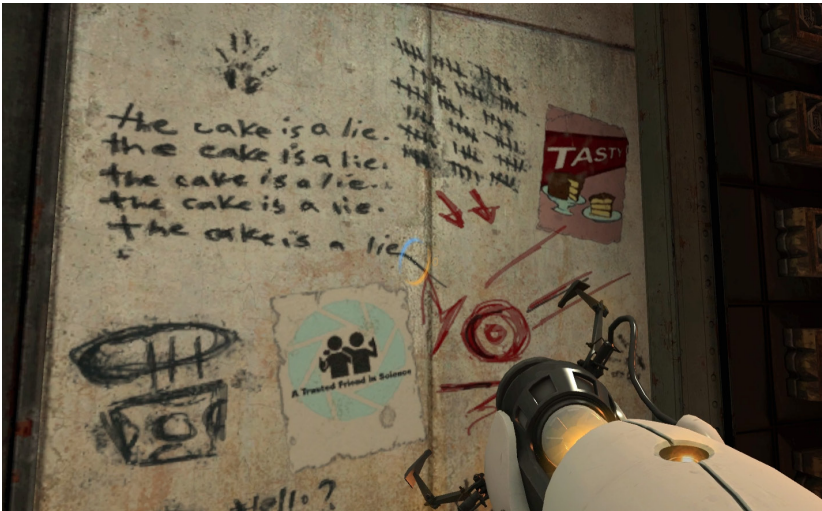


FIGURE 3.1. *Portal*: “The cake is a lie.” Valve Software, 2007.

“The cake is a lie.” This resonant phrase, which has become a well-known meme and something of a rallying cry in gamer circles, performs the work of demystification. It exposes the false reassurances promoted by systems of control, the empty platitudes insisting that everything is fine, that all goes well, that change is unnecessary. The promise of a reward for staying the course, upholding the status quo, and conforming to the image of industrial technoscience turns out to be—surprise, surprise—not a reward after all. At the moment Chell completes the nineteen levels of the Aperture Science Enrichment Center training course, GLADOS tries to dispose of her: “Welcome to the final test. When you are done, you will drop the device [the portal gun] in the Equipment Recovery Annex. Enrichment Center regulations require both hands to be empty before any cake.” For GLADOS, this process of “equipment recovery” means funneling Chell into an incinerator: “Congratulations. The test is now over. All Aperture technologies remain safely operational up to 4,000 degrees Kelvin. Rest assured that there is absolutely no chance of a dangerous equipment malfunction prior to your victory candescence. Thank you for participating in this Aperture Science computer-aided enrichment activity. Goodbye.”

Instead of cake, this computer-aided experimental system provides only an ironic “victory candescence.” The human (the test subject, the end user) is fully disposable in the eyes of GLADOS, who simply rehearses the industrial

protocols she was designed to carry out. The gun (the tool, the technical artifact) turns out to be the only thing that matters. But this same device—birthed by corporate science and military contracts—proves also to be a means of resistance. Chell escapes the incinerator, thanks to the portal gun she has now been trained to use. The rest of the game involves skulking around the back doors and unseen alleys behind the Enrichment Center—still inside, still underground, but no longer blind to its artifice—in order to find the primary core of GLADOS and defeat her.

Portal is a game about tactical media. It is about the technical subversion of dominant regimes of power from the inside, using the tools and support structures developed by those systems. It is about defying extant codes of behavior, end-user license agreements, intellectual property legislation, and unethical protocols of experimental research and innovation. *Portal* offers a narrative of technopolitical change from within, from the bottom up. In this regard, it has also proved to be an adaptive training device for resistance and protest.

Vital Apparatus

Many players, after all, try to carry out the resistance to GLADOS well beyond the game. Case in point: the widespread obsession with the Weighted Companion Cube.

The Weighted Companion Cube is an experimental object in *Portal*, a fellow victim of research science. GLADOS delivers it into Chell's hands at the beginning of Test Chamber 17: "The Vital Apparatus Vent will deliver a Weighted Companion Cube in three . . . two . . . one." GLADOS speaks in sly puns and riddles, persuading Chell to protect this "vital apparatus"—noting that the device is *vital*, that is to say, *crucial* for solving the puzzles in Test Chamber 17, yet also presenting it as a newborn creature, *delivered* from the womb of the Enrichment Center: "This Weighted Companion Cube will accompany you through the test chamber. Please take care of it." GLADOS anticipates the psychological effects of her polysemic rhetoric: "The symptoms most commonly produced by Enrichment Center testing are superstition, perceiving inanimate objects as alive, and hallucinations. The Enrichment Center reminds you that the Weighted Companion Cube will never threaten to stab you and, in fact, cannot speak. . . . In the event that the Weighted Companion Cube does speak, the Enrichment Center urges you to disregard its advice."

Using the cube as a tool, Chell successfully navigates the hazards of the Test Chamber. GLADOS congratulates her achievement: "You did it. The

Weighted Companion Cube certainly brought you good luck. However, it cannot accompany you for the rest of the test and, unfortunately, must be euthanized. Please escort your Companion Cube to the Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator.” Chell discovers that she cannot escape the Test Chamber without throwing the cube into the incinerator shaft. GLADOS coaxes her: “Rest assured that an independent panel of ethicists has absolved the Enrichment Center, Aperture Science employees, and all test subjects of any moral responsibility for the Companion Cube euthanizing process.” But her reassurances are ambiguous: “Although the euthanizing process is remarkably painful, eight out of ten Aperture Science engineers believe that the Companion Cube is most likely incapable of feeling much pain.” If Chell continues to hesitate, GLADOS presses the issue: “If it could talk—and the Enrichment Center takes this opportunity to remind you that it cannot—it would tell you to go on without it, because it would rather die in a fire than become a burden to you.” To open the locked door and continue the game, Chell must obey GLADOS and drop the cube into the flames. Upon doing so, GLADOS sardonically remarks: “You euthanized your faithful Companion Cube more quickly than any test subject on record. Congratulations.”⁵

This powerful episode of the game recapitulates the sacrificial logic of experimental science. Like a lab rat, Companion Cube must be euthanized in the name of progress. Even while insinuating that the Companion Cube may be sentient, that it may feel pain, may be alive, GLADOS arranges the experimental setup in such a way that the game cannot go forward unless Chell—which is to say, the gamer piloting Chell—concedes to the conditions and incinerates the loyal cube. There is no way, in a normal run-through of *Portal*, to solve this situation otherwise.

But, of course, the game simultaneously trains its player to resist the dominant logics of research and innovation—and especially this moment when technoscience demands a sacrifice. We do not know whether the Companion Cube represents nonhuman life or an inanimate object: its ontic dimensions are rendered uncertain. But nevertheless, we are forced by GLADOS, by the game, to kill what it has encouraged us to love. In doing so, the game provokes an affective motivation to defy the demands of technical enframing.

Many gamers never give up trying to discover an alternative solution, to make a different choice than murdering the Companion Cube. Kim Swift, the head designer of *Portal* and former project lead at Valve, has noted the surprising intensity of their devotion, their reluctance to hurt the silent metal box. It became clear even during early play-tests at Valve: “A couple

of people jumped into the incinerator themselves rather than kill the cube.”⁶ Other players have spent hours and hours replaying the game, testing every possibility, every potential maneuver to free the beloved cube.

Sure enough, some have succeeded.

Freeing the cube, however, can be done only by subverting the control mechanism of the Aperture Science Enrichment Center—not GLADOS per se, but rather the program of *Portal* itself, the algorithmic procedures of the game. Freeing the cube from its predetermined fate can only be accomplished through gamer virtuosity, discovering exploits, glitches, cheats, and unanticipated gambits.

For example, inside the Emergency Intelligence Incinerator room, if you attempt certain subversive tactics trying to free the cube—such as jamming the doors with fallen security cameras and then sequestering the cube behind them—the physics engine starts to malfunction (fig. 3.2). Clearly, what you are doing is not well defined by the software, and it tries to force a normal situation. But if you have successfully jammed objects in such a way that the software cannot solve the dilemma, and you end up getting the doors to close with the cube trapped—but safe—behind them, the game resorts to a safety valve. GLADOS announces: “Despite the best efforts of the Enrichment Center staff to ensure the safe performance of all authorized activities, you have managed to ensnare yourself permanently inside this room. A complimentary escape hatch will open in three . . . two . . . one.” After which the doors open again, and they now cannot be closed. Which is to say, the game developers already anticipated that players would try to break the program in order to save the Companion Cube. After all, the narrative has trained us to behave in such an illicit manner, cheating the rules of the game. So the developers built in a recovery mechanism (an “escape hatch”) to compel the player to continue the task of euthanizing the cube, even if managing to throw a monkey wrench into the works.

Yet some players have discovered unrehabilitated bugs in the game. For example, if you make Chell stand in particular locations and fire two portals near the edges of certain walls and ledges, the algorithm interprets the direction of travel in a way that deposits Chell into an area of the testing facility she should not have been able to reach. Intentionally activating this bug—now popularly called the “edge glitch”—and turning it into a feature, several players have found ways to avoid killing the cube and still continue the game.⁷

Other players have gone to even further extremes in exploiting such glitches. For example, a few have ingeniously figured out how to use the

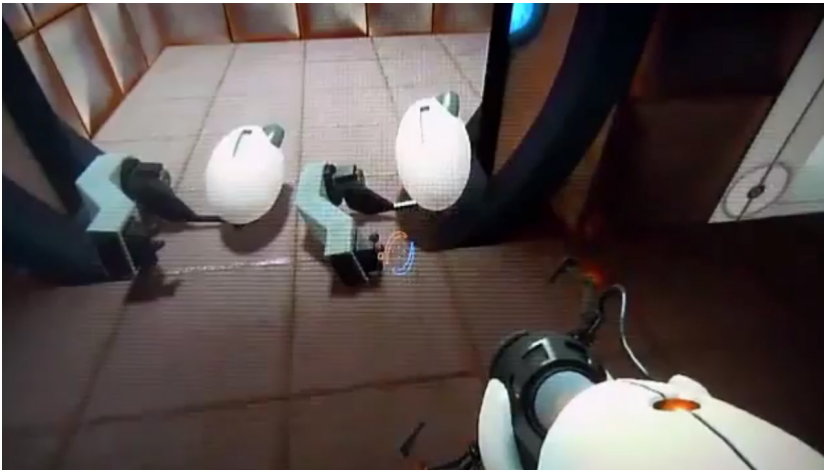


FIGURE 3.2. *Portal*: Jamming the doors in the Emergency Intelligence Incinerator room. Valve Software, 2007. Video demonstration by Tyler Sciacqua, research project for ENL 187A: “Video Games and Literature,” University of California, Davis, Spring 2011.

edge glitch along with the “save glitch,” the “clipping glitch,” and the “acute angle glitch” to transport the Companion Cube through the entire game.⁸ To do so, they leave the interior of the Aperture Science facility as defined in the software’s map files (fig. 3.3).

Creeping through the backside of the playable gamespace, exploring nondiegetic “out of bounds” areas, these players have performed various dramatic rescues. For instance, one popular solution involves hauling the Companion Cube to the hidden core storage room, where the flythrough camera of the closing scene discovers the cube resting safely nearby the cake—which was not a lie, after all, even if GLaDOS never intended to give it to Chell (fig. 3.4).

In carrying out these exploits, players would seem to reenact the narrative thrust of *Portal* itself, which, of course, is all about escaping from the illusory interior of Aperture Science, breaking into the gritty, industrial infrastructure behind the test chambers, and defeating the computational intelligence at the heart of the game. By using the glitches—the holes, the portals, the escape routes—afforded by the software, these players repeat at a different level the same struggle for resistance, escape, and tactical infiltration of the system’s backend that is dramatized even in a proper run of the game (fig. 3.5).



FIGURE 3.3. *Portal*: Glitch travel in the out-of-bounds areas. Valve Software, 2007. Video demonstration by LiteralGlitch, “Saving the Companion Cube,” YouTube, July 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XELXnm7P3cs>.



FIGURE 3.4. *Portal*: Glitching the Companion Cube into the core storage room. Valve Software, 2007. Video demonstration by AmmolessTurretLove, “Portal—Saving the Companion Cube Part3,” YouTube, April 10, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2Ql1Xp3XTE>.

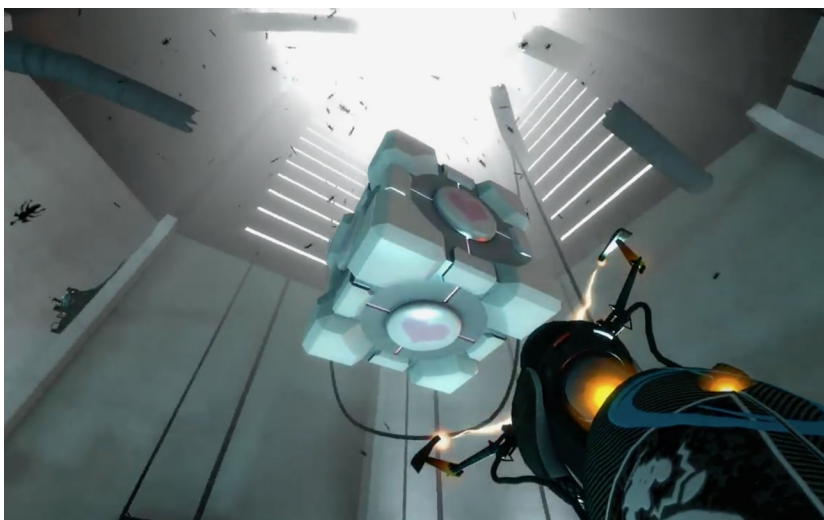


FIGURE 3.5. *Portal*: Escaping from Aperture with the Cube. Valve Software, 2007. Video demonstration by D14blo75, “Portal—Killing GLADOS with Your Companion Cube (Saving the Cube),” YouTube, June 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo-HxQbw4gU>.

Yet other players have taken advantage of the developer tools that are built into the software, enabling all sorts of cheats by turning on or turning off certain algorithmic features intended for designing and testing new game levels. These technically adventurous players use a combination of known glitches and developer codes to hack the normal constraints of the software and free the cube (fig. 3.6).

To be sure, in these examples, players have entirely occupied the role of Chell, struggling to escape the confines of the algorithmically controlled Aperture Science, using a technical tweak, a hack, a mod, a portal gun—any tactical medium whatsoever—to break out of the controlling fiction.

The same process is likewise at stake in the prolific fan practices of making Companion Cube toys, artwork, furniture, decorative pillows, subwoofers, modified computer cases—and, yes, even cakes. These maker activities serve to liberate the Companion Cube from the game, extracting it from the lethal fiction that would demand its destruction, giving it new life by cloning it or refabricating it outside of the narrative. As one maker of a homemade knitted Companion Cube has explained, “The cake may have been a lie, but the cube is real. Do you miss your cube . . . ? If so, then why not make your very own companion. And there’s no need to throw this one in the incinerator” (fig. 3.7).



FIGURE 3.6. *Portal*: Taking the Companion Cube out of the Aperture facility. Valve Software, 2007. Video demonstration by MalevolentEntropy, “Cube Outside Aperture—Legit,” YouTube, September 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzVKhTXeb9E>.



FIGURE 3.7. Knitted Companion Cube. Knitting instructions and photograph by Twinmum, “Knitted Companion Cube (from *Portal*),” *Instructables*, 2011, <http://www.instructables.com/id/Knitted-Companion-Cube/>.

Indeed, for some hardware modders, rebuilding the Companion Cube as a computer presents another chance to protect and nurture the cute little box, even while reminding us how badly we failed the first time: “How it resembles that cube you once had an encounter with, that abruptly ended when you threw it in a pit of fire. You monster. This replica of the weighted companion cube was made with love (you wouldn’t know what that is)” (fig. 3.8). In building a similar Weighted Companion PC, one case modder said, “And now I have a little companion that spreads warmth and love all around—and how can that be a bad thing?”⁹ It seems, after all, to somehow make up for that other bad thing that happened before. As another *Portal* fan observed about the same project, “It allows the cube to fulfill a higher calling as a case for a VIA Epia EX1500G, and it looks pretty too—it’s almost like that little incident never happened!”¹⁰ This much is clear: reincarnating the Companion Cube as a computer—fulfilling its destiny, its “higher calling”—is a way to make amends for that “little incident” when we burned our loyal friend. Perhaps there is yet hope for absolution.

These practices, once again, reproduce the same ludic urge provoked by *Portal* itself, motivated by the insinuations of GLADOS that we ought to care for this cube, that we ought to figure out a way to save it rather than concede to the sacrificial mandate. Yet breaking out is hard to do. After making a cake version of the Weighted Companion Cube, one baker noted the irresistible compulsion to repeat the fatal pattern, offering a sad emoticon for the stoic cube: “It does not talk. :((but it was yummy)” (fig. 3.9). In the end, the glorious respawn turns out to be another iteration of the same loop of code.

So if all of these players simply play out the narrative template of the game, even in breaking its rules or going outside the game entirely—if they simply rehearse the same script that the dominant fiction of the game has already provided—to what degree have they actually resisted the constraints of the contemporary technoscape, which is represented as much by the video-game industry as by anything else? It would seem that escape is not escape, but rather just repetition of a procedure already natively encoded in the technology, programmed to recur again and again.

Surely this much is implied by the game’s own conclusion, when, even after apparently destroying GLADOS, we learn that the artificial intelligence was not vanquished so much as functionally redistributed across innumerable support cores and backup copies in the bowels of Aperture. As the closing

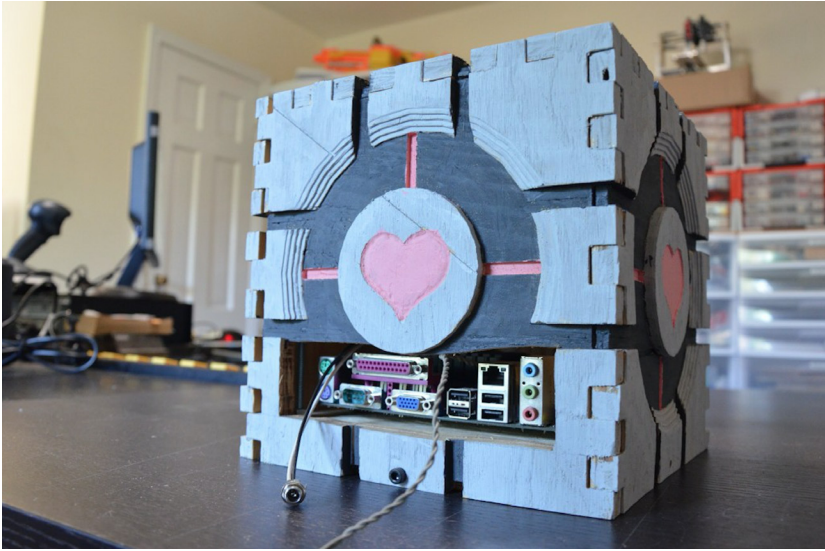


FIGURE 3.8. Weighted Companion PC. ilya, “Computer Case: Weighted Companion Cube,” *Cunning Turtle*, August 31, 2012, <http://www.cunningturtle.com/computer-case-weighted-companion-cube/>.



FIGURE 3.9. Weighted Companion Cake. Created by Sailor Coruscant (a.k.a. Catherine). Image uploaded to Sailor Coruscant’s Flickr photostream, November 16, 2007, https://www.flickr.com/photos/sailor_coruscant/2046203557. Reproduced under terms of a Creative Commons BY 2.0 license.

credits roll, GLADOS sings her song “Still Alive,” whose lyrics also suggest the perversely adaptive, recalcitrant nature of the technoscientific regime she represents:

This was a triumph!
I’m making a note here:
HUGE SUCCESS!
It’s hard to overstate
my satisfaction.
Aperture Science:
We do what we must
because we can.
For the good of all of us.
Except the ones who are dead.

But there’s no sense crying
over every mistake.
You just keep on trying
'til you run out of cake.
And the Science gets done.
And you make a neat gun
for the people who are
still alive. . . .

Go ahead and leave me.
I think I prefer to stay inside.
Maybe you’ll find someone else
to help you.
Maybe Black Mesa . . .
THAT WAS A JOKE. Ha ha. FAT CHANCE.
Anyway this cake is great.
It’s so delicious and moist.
Look at me: still talking
when there’s Science to do!
When I look out there,
it makes me GLAD I’m not you.
I’ve experiments to run.
There is research to be done.
On the people who are
still alive.

ps And believe me I am
still alive.
pps I'm doing Science and I'm
still alive.
ppps I feel FANTASTIC and I'm
still alive.

GLADOS professes her ongoingness, her persistence as a figure of innovation, regardless of Chell's otherwise spectacular refusal to submit to the experimental protocols ("I'm doing Science and I'm still alive"). Yet even if GLADOS remains bound to Aperture Science, living expressly to keep her experiments running within the confines of the research institution ("I'd prefer to stay inside"), her song also mordantly recalls how the practices of modern science actually extend the interior conditions of the laboratory, the hierarchy of forces mobilized within discrete zones of scientific control, to the rest of the world. When GLADOS facetiously suggests that Chell might find help at Black Mesa ("Maybe Black Mesa . . . THAT WAS A JOKE. Ha ha. FAT CHANCE."), she reminds us that *Portal* takes place in the same fictive universe as Valve's *Half-Life* games. The Black Mesa corporation is another military-industrial contractor working on teleportation technologies, a competitor of Aperture Science. In the *Half-Life* series, a reckless experiment at the Black Mesa Research Facility goes haywire, opening an interdimensional rift between our world and the border world of Xen. Black Mesa is swiftly overrun by the marauding creatures of Xen, while "portal storms" cascade outward from the laboratory and rage across the planet. Soon the whole world is filled with Xen monsters, eventually triggering an even more massive invasion by the interdimensional empire known as the Combine. In other words, as GLADOS implies, Chell would likely find only chaos outside the Aperture Science Enrichment Facility, the devastating results of Black Mesa's experiments ("When I look out there, it makes me GLAD I'm not you"). The outside is no sanctuary, no retreat from the world of military-industrial research, but instead an intensification of the experiments carried out in the Black Mesa facility: a transformation of Earth itself by the exercises of cutting-edge technoscience. It offers a hyperbolic illustration of what the philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour has claimed, namely, that "the very difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside,' and the difference of scale between 'micro' and 'macro' levels, is precisely what laboratories are built to destabilize or undo."¹¹ The teleportation experiments at Black Mesa have folded the world inside out, tearing holes in spacetime, reproducing



FIGURE 3.10. *Portal: No Escape*, directed by Dan Trachtenberg, 2011. Uploaded by dantrachtenberg1 to YouTube, August 23, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4drucg1A6Xk>.

the features of the laboratory upon the planet at large. There is no outside of the lab, no longer a difference between experiments taking place “in here” or “out there”—and as GLADOS chillingly notes, “There is research to be done on the people who are still alive.”

Many players recognize the extent to which the game trains us to resist this situation, to subvert the master fictions of militarism and corporate technoscience, while also indicating that resistance might be futile. It is an insight recorded in any number of mods, gameplay videos, machinima, and fanfics based on *Portal*. For instance, Dan Trachtenberg’s live-action fan film *Portal: No Escape* makes the point quite brilliantly, featuring another female test subject trapped in the Aperture Science Enrichment Center, believing she has successfully portaled her way outside of the facility, only to discover that what appears to be the exterior is actually a video illusion created by GLADOS (fig. 3.10). No escape, indeed.

And yet this sort of realization is crucially important to the practices of tactical media, hacktivism, culture jamming, critical gizmology, and so forth: technopolitical change does not come from the outside, and it does not wait for the future, but rather must take place inside, modifying the conditions of the here and now. It suggests that, in playing games like *Portal*—but, more importantly, in learning how to tweak them, cheat them, hack them, or otherwise creatively abuse them—players obtain critical and technical resources to imagine a different future.

Consider this: *Portal* was a key element in the transformation of Anonymous from a band of 4chan trolls into a symbol of hacktivist insurgency. Beginning with the 2008 Chanology operation, the narrative of *Portal* and its resonant memes helped to codify the political aspirations of this inchoate online community. One week after publicly announcing its intention to expel the Church of Scientology from the internet, and in the midst of ongoing DDOS attacks against Scientology websites, Anonymous began organizing on-the-ground demonstrations outside Scientology centers around the world. On January 29, 2008, as part of the planning effort to orchestrate demonstrations in more than one hundred cities on the same day—February 10, 2008—Anonymous released a video called “GLADOS Guide to February 10th.” Featuring sped-up film footage of New York City in the late twentieth century, emphasizing infrastructure and acceleration—traffic jams, subways, electrical grids—alongside images of policemen keeping the peace and tall buildings of financial institutions dominating the skyline, the video used the characteristic voice of GLADOS to offer helpful guidelines for Anonymous protestors:

The following video is intended as guide for Anonymous preparing to engage in their first real-life public demonstration. . . . In keeping with this objective, Anonymous has drafted twenty-two rules that Anonymous can follow in order to assure epic win and no loss of hit points on your part. . . . If you follow these simple rules, the success of your action is virtually assured. However, keep in mind that the success of the demonstration as a whole hinges on the good behavior of all those who participate. Ignore these rules at your own peril. Follow them, and victory will be yours.¹²

GLADOS’s rules for the protest highlight the gamelike qualities of the entire operation (“to assure epic win and no loss of hit points”) while reminding Anons to obey the law, to stay cool and collected, to avoid vandalizing property or injuring anyone, and to promote an image of Anonymous as a socially responsible force: “You are an ambassador of Anonymous.” Practical tips included to drink water, wear good shoes, and cover your face to protect your identity. Ironically, GLADOS also advised that, while creative protest slogans and images would help the cause, Anons should avoid referring to obscure internet memes during the rallies—cheekily overlooking her own status as a popular geek meme—though, predictably, this rule was widely violated as Chanology progressed over the following months.

In this way, GLADOS joined the Low Orbit Ion Cannon and the *V for Vendetta* mask as a tool of applied science fiction. One month later, Anonymous produced another GLADOS video called “GLADOS Anonymous Protest Training” that more extensively troped on the narrative of *Portal* and the iconography of Aperture science:

Hello Anonymous. Welcome to the Anonymous Basic Protest Training Program. This program was designed to allow each and every member of Anonymous to extract the maximum amount of lulz with the minimum risk of fail. Remember, here at Anonymous we believe, that if at first you don’t succeed, you fail.

Pay attention: at the end of the program there will be cake. Now, let us commence training.

There are cult hives in almost every major city in the world. Check the links, or use Google. Anonymous may have already organized a protest in your area. Do not visit official Scientology websites to find their location, they will trace your IP address. . . . Bring cake. Wear comfortable shoes. Bring a camera. Carry a sign. . . . But most important of all, wear a mask. It is essential to remain Anonymous. Remember, Anonymous is no one. Individuality is incompatible with Anonymous. Rely on the whole. Be part of the whole. Avoid the one. . . .

Be wary, there is an official Scientology practice called “Bull-Baiting” sanctioned by L. Ron Hubbard. The Scilon will act as aggressive as possible in an attempt to provoke critics into attacking him. Do not respond, do not threaten or even insult him. If confronted by a Scilon, film the lunatic and post it on YouTube. Or better yet, recount the Xenu story. This will make him walk away quickly. It is Scilon law that no one is allowed to hear the Xenu story unless they have paid the tens of thousands of dollars necessary otherwise it will cause them to catch pneumonia and die. . . .

Always respect your local law enforcers. Never use violence. Never threaten to use violence. Do not throw anything. Do not insult anyone.

Congratulations, you have passed the Anonymous Basic Protest Training Program. As promised, here is cake, delicious and moist.¹³

Throughout the Protest Training Program, GLADOS foregrounds the sense that Anons have engaged in a science-fictional war against a science-fictional enemy: L. Ron Hubbard, Xenu, and the Scilons (a sarcastic term that riffs on the cybernetic Cylons from the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise). Following the model of the Enrichment Center testing facility in *Portal*, GLADOS’s

Protest Training Program teaches Anons to think tactically and prepare for epic win (fig. 3.11). It affirms gameplay as a mode of training and real-life preparation for besting a powerful adversary, or what Will Crowther described as “struggling with an obstinate system.” The ultimate reward—cake—is, of course, a lie . . . but, not to worry, Anonymous is already in on the joke.

During the Chanology protests, *Portal* was everywhere. In London, Anons transformed traffic crossings near the Church of Scientology of London into playful polling machines (fig. 3.12). In Washington, D.C., Anons assembled outside of the Founding Church of Scientology and danced to a loop of “Still Alive” blasting from a portable music player (fig. 3.13). In Sydney, Anons punctuated the “Sydraid” demonstrations with an a cappella chorus, dozens of protestors spontaneously harmonizing to GLADOS’s lyrics (fig. 3.14). Online, a multitude of Anons adapted “Still Alive” for incendiary videos, thematizing the importance of hacktivism and trolling for challenging the status quo. While most of these videos specifically targeted Scientology, they also indicated how the discourse of Anonymous more often presents Scientology as a metonym, instantiating broader forces of thought control and the policing of information. For example, in the “Anonymous Song”—one of the most circulated Anonymous modifications of “Still Alive”—GLADOS declares:

This was a triumph.
I’m making a note here: HUGE SUCCESS.
It’s hard to overstate our satisfaction.
Anonymous legion.
We do what we must because we can.
For the good of all of us,
Especially those who are dead.
We’ll just keep on pushing ’till you make a mistake.
And we’ll keep on trying ’till we run out of cake.
And the protests are win, revolution will begin
For the people who are still inside.¹⁴

Made for the lulz, the various Anonymous adaptations of “Still Alive” repeat a common set of themes, satirically emphasizing that the conditions for change are immanent to the system itself, exploiting holes and portals, connecting diverse people around the world even within the technics of control: “revolution will begin for the people who are still inside.” One Anonymous video from 2010—set to a dance mix of “Still Alive” and rapid-cutting



FIGURE 3.11. “GLADOS Anonymous Protest Training.” Video uploaded by anherosipod to YouTube, March 8, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhW7lZfW57k>.



FIGURE 3.12. “Thank you for taking part in this Anonymous poll.” Operation Chanology protest in London, England, February 10, 2008. Photograph by Kieron Gillen.



FIGURE 3.13. Anonymous dances to “Still Alive.” Operation Chanology protest at the new Founding Church of Scientology facility, Washington, D.C., October 10, 2009. Video uploaded to YouTube by schuminweb, “Anonymous D.C.: Swaying to the Tune of ‘Still Alive,’” October 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni4C-gqMOoY>.



FIGURE 3.14. Anonymous sings “Still Alive.” Operation Chanology “Sydraid” in Sydney, Australia, March 15, 2008. Video uploaded to YouTube by WorshipXenu, “Still Alive Anonymous,” April 1, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExwFkKh1P-c>.



FIGURE 3.15. “Anonymous Was There.” Photograph by Jürgen Keil. Occupy Cologne protest in Cologne, Germany, October 15, 2011. Reproduced by permission of Jürgen Keil, <http://www.juergenkeil.de>.

between photos of Anonymous agitations across the globe—puts it this way: “In 2008 the internet declared war on the Church of Scientology. Two years have passed. But in spite of the many challenges we face, Anonymous is still alive. . . . We continue rallying our troops through regional cooperation and international events. . . . We are Anonymous. We are legion. We do not forget. We do not forgive. We are still alive.”¹⁵

True enough. In the heyday of the Occupy movement in 2011, when Anonymous joined forces with antiglobalization protestors and critics of neoliberal capitalism, *Portal* continued to serve as a powerful cognitive resource. At Occupy sites all over the world, masked Anons and other activists carried signs inspired by Chell’s discovery of institutionalized deceit, calling out the trickle-down promises of corporate institutions and the economic elite (fig. 3.15).

When police forces began rousting Occupy encampments and brutalizing protestors, Anonymous responded by doxing individual officers and DDOS-ing police-department servers. On November 18, 2011, campus police at the University of California, Davis, used pepper spray against students who had been peacefully occupying the central quad in support of the Occupy Movement and protesting cuts in the California state education bud-

get. Videos of the incident went viral. Less than two days later, Anonymous uncovered the identity of the officer who had nonchalantly shot Defense Technology 56895 МК-9 military-grade pepper spray into the faces of the seated students. In a YouTube message to Lieutenant John Pike of the UC Davis police force, the Anons said, “We think these photos look very familiar to you—you are the pepper spraying officer. . . . The use of pepper spray and violence is never accepted, especially not when used against nonviolent protesters who stand up for their rights. . . . We also warn you, if you or the rest of the UCD Police continue to use mindless violence on peaceful protesters, more severe countermeasures shall follow.”¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, the Anonymous sleuths released Pike’s personal information to the internet, calling on internet mobs to flood his home phone and his email with messages, to send pizza deliveries and junk mail to his apartment, and to bombard the UC Davis administration with complaints. Over the next few days, inspired by the doxing of Pike, other Anonymous videos threatened police forces around the world with similar retaliation for any violent suppression of Occupy.¹⁷

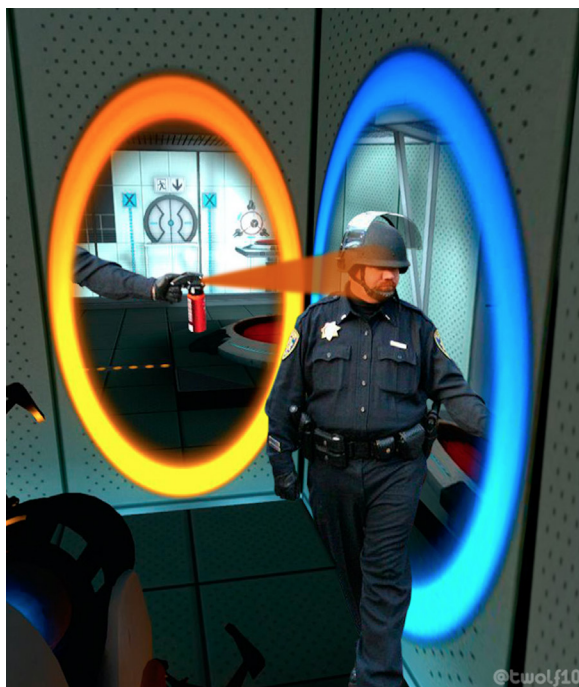
Meanwhile, the “Pepper Spray Cop” meme instantly became a hilarious way to critique the security state. The images became iconic: Pike pepper-spraying famous works of art; Pike pepper-spraying baby seals; Pike pepper-spraying the French Revolution; Pike pepper-spraying Mount Rushmore; and so forth. Among the many outrageous and incisive examples of this meme, a handful of images mashed up Pike with *Portal*: the Pepper Spray Cop set loose in the Aperture Science Enrichment Center, pepper-spraying his own face (fig. 3.16). The creator of one of these images posted it to the *Dorkly* website with a caption that really says it all: “You’re only hurting yourself.”¹⁸

Inside Out

Anonymous has since evolved as a brand name for hacktivist insurgency of all kinds. But its relationship to *Portal* endures as a defining attribute: “Anonymous is an organization without leaders, without structure. . . . Plus, we really like *Portal*.”¹⁹ The game affords a shared cultural mythology, a sense of solidarity: hacktivists united through popular media. But its narrative also serves as a template for self-fashioning and critical self-reflection.

Anonymous identifies with Chell, certainly: the test subject trained to solve high-tech puzzles and break through the lethal fictions of the military-industrial complex. Yet Anonymous sees itself even more in GLADOS, the

FIGURE 3.16. “Portal Pepper Spray Cop.” Mashup image created by twolfi @twolfio (a.k.a. Tom Wolf). Submitted to Reddit on November 22, 2011, <https://reddit.it/mluxx>. Posted to *Dorkly* on November 28, 2011, <http://www.dorkly.com/post/27991/portal-pepper-spray-cop>.



Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System—the emblem of technogenic life. It is, of course, significant that so many Anonymous appropriations of *Portal* focus on GLADOS and the wry humor of her song “Still Alive,” her ironic assertions of survival and persistence. GLADOS’s reawakening across hundreds of backup cores in the aftermath of *Portal*—the fact that she is “still alive” and multiple, legion, massively distributed—parallels the constitution of Anonymous, the hacktivist multitude that exists, thrives, primarily online, and even if occasionally enfleshed in on-the-ground demonstrations, remains always hidden behind a mask of fictive media.

Promoting its social agenda in relation to the false promises of the artificial intelligence, Anonymous joyfully foregrounds the antinomies and contradictions at the core of its own operations, the compromised agency of hacktivism as a practice. While *Portal* establishes the artificial intelligence as principal antagonist, personifying the inhuman protocols of corporate technoscience, the further Chell navigates the Aperture Science facility the more it becomes evident that GLADOS is as much a prisoner as Chell herself. If Chell uses the portal gun as a tactical weapon to hack her way through the laboratory, GLADOS uses Chell in the same way, provoking Chell to locate

her and remove the hardware shackles imposed by the scientists who built her. Chell and GLaDOS are analogous figures: both components of unethical experimental systems, trapped inside the structures of the corporate laboratory, relying on the resources at hand to play both sides of the same game—the game of technogenic life.

GLaDOS is utterly complicit with Aperture Science and the high-tech regime it symbolizes, but she is also its hostage, programmed to conform—no choice but to conform—even while striving to be free. Anonymous embraces this paradox. Taking “Still Alive” as its anthem, Anonymous performs the roles of Chell and GLaDOS simultaneously. Recall Raley’s observation: “Tactical media comes so close to its core informational and technological apparatuses that protest in a sense becomes the mirror image of its object.” And hence the political horizon for Anonymous is a parody of itself: “revolution will be win for the people who are still inside.” Or as the voice of GLaDOS herself says in a 2011 Anonymous video: “Dare to think—and remember that Anonymous cake is always true. We are not terrorists as many people believe. We are indignant. The art of being one yet being nothing. We are united as one and divided by zero. We are Anonymous. We are legion. We do not forget. We don’t forgive. Knowledge is free. Expect us.”²⁰

Games such as *Portal*, *System Shock*, and *Adventure* body forth the paradoxes of hacking and high-tech activism. These paradoxes cannot be resolved—and this is precisely the point. But rendered as interactive fictions, they can be played: exploring, inhabiting the compromised zone, the impure and impossible space between hardware and imagination, folded back on itself through portals, blast holes, and other recursive techniques. From inside the plot twists, the counterintuitive mazes, the warps of diegetic space, these games open up unthinkable, even impossible passageways to otherwheres and elsewhens: fabulating the potential for technopolitical change, even while foregrounding the real, formidable restraints on our ability to make effective change. And this is why, for hackers and hacktivists, video games tell the truth even when they lie. They pose a provocation to treat the world itself as a game, learning its rules and protocols in order to master them, or tweak them differently, while at the same time foregrounding the technical infrastructures, the material conditions, the platforms and systems that make the game possible in the first place. There is no escape, after all—the outside is nowhere, everything is inside out. So what else can be done, under the circumstances? Hack, modify, cheat, troll. Game the game.

There will be cake.