



PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First-Person Puzzle AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail ([www.steampowered.com](http://www.steampowered.com)) ESRB RATING: Teen  
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

## REVIEW



**The firstborn commercial child** of game design—school grads (and obvious beneficiary of Valve's god-fathering), *Portal* was to be a value-added bonus, a puzzle anthology played from first-person perspective with the assistance of a gimmick too good to neglect—though perhaps impossible to integrate in games like, well,

*Half-Life 2*. The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device, an Acme-style doohickey and sister to the Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator, generates wormholes. Left-clicking produces an entryway, right-clicking provides an exit, which means that anywhere in sight is also within reach. And provided the peg fits the hole, anything passes through—a description of level-design perdition (since developers want neither us nor items in their worlds ending up where they never intended) that accounts for *Portal's* sparsely populated, antiseptic spaces. And that's fine, since nobody expects story from a spatial-reasoning exam. Only *Portal* does tell a tale—and this is its departure point.

"Who are we, and why are we here in this white-walled labyrinth?" At the outset, it isn't important. The Aperture gadget, dazzlingly different, distracts all attention, as does the fuzzy female voice that goads us on. Carry crates here, warp there—we do as we're told until the tasks turn lethal and "she" sounds more and more like *2001: A Space Odyssey's* amok mainframe. At this point, one of many moving platforms malfunctions. What's behind its sanitized surface hints at the rabbit hole's true dimensions.

### OPERANT CONDITIONING

The more intricate the rat maze, the more necessary the reward—part of *Portal's* sinister genius lies in the cheese-crumbs trail it leaves. Puzzle solving is an end in itself, and the game's Skinner boxes (note that, like the computer intelligence pulling

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our strings, Valve remotely tracks player progress, indirectly seeing what stumps us) are supremely entertaining to crack in on-again-off-again sessions. With the help of a narrative nicely tied to that of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, however, "now and again" becomes "nonstop, three-to-four-hour play-through" (but that's between you and Valve).

Easy to spoil, the plot is also archly comic. Know that automated sentries, there to eviscerate test subjects who fail to upend them with portal improv, whisper sweet and oddly pitched "Marco's to our suspicious "Polo"s. Know that the game's PMSing HAL 9000 provides us with a Valentine's heart-tagged crate and calls it a "companion cube." Know that it orders players to incinerate the thing once we've used it to depress switchplates (a pun on the infamous 1960s Milgram social-psych experiment that showed people's readiness to perform acts that conflict with their personal conscience, provided an authority figure instructs it). Know that *Portal*, alongside *Episode Two*, proves the creative viability of games that are neither low-rent/casual/arcade nor costly all-or-nothing wagers in the monolithic triple-A market. But above all, know that we're being f\*\*\*ed with in the best way. • **Shawn Elliott**

### VERDICT

✔ Puzzles and plot harmonize perfectly.

✔ Devious puzzles might stymie some players.

9/10

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• *Portal* includes several time-challenge puzzles distinct from the story proper.

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