

Computer Games and Plato and Art?

A Scintillating Introduction

This paper is a thinly disguised attempt to take a subject I know something about (computers) and juxtapose it with something I know less about (Plato) in light of something I know nothing about (art). This will be evident upon further reading, although I made my best effort. To be serious, I do think that there is something legitimate about taking a topic like aesthetics and trying to shoehorn comparisons of programming, video games and Plato into it. First of all, programming, much like engineering and some of the sciences, can be seen as art forms. In much the same way that a musician “discovers” a new guitar riff, a programmer can “discover” a new algorithm for performing a task with optimal speed. Or maybe just optimal coolness. The whole notion of doing things in a new and exciting way is entrenched in the programming community, at least the hacker community, the guys who make open source products that power 95% of the internet. Given that, we can consider programming to be an art. If you disagree, just pretend you buy into the concept, at least for a little while. The real question is how Plato fits into all of this, and that is where we will begin. It is entirely possible I will use other points of view besides Plato’s, such as Aristotle and Parmenides, as they are also quite interesting.

Plato Fears Art

Trying to give Plato's view of aesthetics is most likely destined for failure, at least for someone like me. Therefore I will attempt to distill what I do know into two separate camps of thought, and then make my comparisons to programming (and computer gaming specifically) from that.

The Republic spells out what many to believe to be Plato's own view of art, that of an imitation of an imitation. To be more explicit, since physical things are simply a flawed copy of the Forms, and art is a copy of physical things, art can be nothing more than a way of moving us further from the truth and into the world of illusion, which is dangerous. Further, art has an emotional component; one might even argue that art that does nothing to rouse emotions, good or bad, really isn't art at all. Because of this ability to stir the emotions, art is again dangerous.

Countless others have done a fine job at dispelling the myth that art is merely an imitation of physical reality, so I won't dwell too much on that point. But there is something extremely compelling about it that I must address. There is the idea that art is more than a simple copy; perhaps art is about communicating ideas to others, or expressing emotions. All fine and good, but where do these emotions come from? Where do ideas originate? It is nearsighted to assume that since a particular artwork sprung out of the head of an artist that it isn't imitating something. Perhaps the ideas or emotions the artist had are a direct result of interaction with the physical world. How else does one come up with new ideas

except through experience? I'm personally ambivalent about this concept of the origins of art, it really doesn't change how I feel about art or artistic expression, and I am sure this question will be debated countless times from now until doomsday. So, to address the original point, I'll assume in this instance that Plato is right, and art is an imitation of reality, at least in some sense.

Programming and computer games are dangerous

Supposing this is the case, and art does imitate reality and everything done in the name of aesthetics is a poor copy of a copy. How is this dangerous? To bring in the programming aspect which was mentioned earlier, there is some danger involved to be sure. People become slaves to their craft. For instance, many programmers will sit in a room, getting a nasty CRT tan for several days, working on a new project that will "change the world." Perhaps the project does change the world; their emotional attachment to the art they are creating, even if it changes the world, hinders their health. They do not interact with the world or others, and become reclusive. This is not as far fetched as it sounds, and in fact closer to reality than many would like to admit. The artist, or in this case the programmer, becomes so involved with art that they lose sight of reality, which is itself only a copy of Reality.

To take this a step further, consider the art they have produced. A popular game on the market today is World of Warcraft. By all accounts the game is a run away hit. While I personally do not play the game (I prefer the entertainment value in drinking heavily

during football games), everyone I know does. They spend hour upon hour delving into an imaginary world wherein they can become great kings or queens or jesters or wizards or whatever. This vast fantasy environment is so immersive that many of the players abstain from eating, drinking, sleep and bathing (unfortunately). Their emotional attachment to this game, this piece of artwork, removes them from reality in much the same way as the programmer who created the game.

This is almost a mish-mash of two ideas, that of imitation and that of emotional strength and compulsion. Yet there really is no way to separate the two. On the one hand, we have this program with goal of entertaining and expressing some sort of idea, yet in reality the real point of it is to imitate reality so well that a person can exist outside of reality, in their own creation of an ideal reality tailored toward themselves. It could be argued that a novel does the same way in a limited fashion, allowing the reader to place themselves in a fantasy world for a few hours. Movies have a similar effect, but again for a few hours. The World of Warcraft is designed to take an infinite number of hours, and to consume the lives of those who participate in it. Did the programmers intend for this to happen? In some ways yes, because they are interested in profit margins and making money, etc. At some level, however, I doubt they intended for people to become so involved in the game that their lives become nothing more than a distant memory. Actually, they may not even be aware that such a thing is possible, simply because they are so caught up in their own artwork that they fail to realize the implications it has on others.

To explain fully, consider the programmer mentioned previously. His ideal situation is one in which he can perfect his art, or the game which he has meticulously crafted from nothingness into a complete world with a million players. There really isn't much outside of his art, simply because his life revolves around it. Again, this is not far fetched. Many musicians I know would much rather play music than do just about anything. A friend of mine and I were in several (bad) rock bands together, and while I enjoyed playing music, I had outside interests that I liked to pursue just as much (namely carousing and womanizing). My friend, however, would play from the time until he woke up until he went to sleep at night, breaking only when necessary. This obsessive behavior seems to be typical in artists, and computer programmers exhibit it in great quantities. Given that the programmer cannot see outside of his own work environment, it goes without saying that he can't understand why it's a "bad thing" that others enjoy his art so much that they would engage in using it to the exclusion of everything else. I doubt a painter would be too upset that legions of individuals chose to stare intently at his paintings day after day, and thus the programmer sees no problem in a similar situation.

In the preceding case, it is apparent that Plato had a reasonable point with his idea that art is dangerous, especially in the case of art of a pure entertainment variety. Interestingly enough, computer games provide such a compelling illustration of how Plato viewed art as being dangerous that I am forced to write a narrative example.

The Metaphor of the Grotto

Imagine, if you will, a complex computer game, let's call it the Grotto, that is so immersive and detailed that the players of the game cannot separate it from reality. By reality, I mean the reality of the physical universe, not the Platonic Reality (although that will come into play later). What's funny about this analogy is how impossible it is to write anything closely resembling the Allegory of the Cave nowadays without someone saying you're ripping off The Matrix. To get back on topic, assume that the players have implants in their skulls that allow direct access to the game; what happens in the game happens in their minds as if it occurred physically. The rules of the game are the rules of the world, and the game is meant to simulate the world we know with a few exceptions (maybe Batman exists or scantily clad women roam the streets...there must be a reason people want to play it). During a rather lengthy gaming session, perhaps a week, there was a nuclear holocaust, and the million gamers currently attached to the Grotto were left immersed in game-play. With no one to turn off the game, or to disconnect them from it, the gamers essentially lived in the gaming world as if it were the real world. Suppose further that all these gamers were 5 years old, with limited experience in the real world. Twenty years later, someone discovered the underground labyrinth wherein the million-plus gamers were still hooked up to the Grotto, still playing the game. After some study, several self-important scientists in impressive white lab coats warn that simply turning the game off at this point and "waking up" the participants might spell doom, as their brains might not be able to handle the shock. After arguing with a grizzled general who bore a suspicious resemblance to Sam Elliot, the lab coats win and it is decided someone

must volunteer to enter the Grotto and explain the reality of the situation to the participants so they might be able to remove themselves from the game. President Arnold Schwarzenegger, leader of the free peoples of The Confederation of Non-Mutant Zombies, decided to attach himself to the Grotto to free the minds of the trapper gamers. After the President entered the Grotto, he relayed the information to the now 25-year-old gamers who had been imprisoned for years. “Yehu ahrr freehhh, yah!” shouted the President, but the gamers did not understand. To them, reality was such a distant memory that they considered the game to be reality. How could anything exist outside of the Grotto? Surely it was the end all of everything. The President, having both charisma and a crazy accent, convinced the gamers to undergo the procedure necessary to shut down the Grotto and enter real life. With that, the Grotto was disabled and the gamers were released from their strange prison. At first the gamers’ eyes hurt, as they had not seen light in twenty years. But this light was merely the light of the computer console that ran the Grotto. They could see the code running that created the world which they inhabited and thought to be real. After a few moments, they were led outside, and the sun blinded them. They saw buildings and cars and sawed off shotguns, all things they had experience with in the Grotto, yet in the real world they looked more vivid. When touched, these objects were more real than they had thought possible.

In this case, the Grotto limited the understanding of the participants because they were not allowed to see true reality, and instead experienced a copy of it in their own minds. Thus, the art of the programming involved behind creating the Grotto limited the participants to a life of non-life. And even then, the released gamers are not experiencing

reality, but merely a copy of Reality. So while before they were but one level removed from the Forms, in the Grotto they were two levels. Not a good position to be in.

While a bit far fetched, this example isn't really much different than what happens with the World of Warcraft players I mentioned before. If World of Warcraft actually had the capability to suck players in on a pseudo-real level, like the Grotto, how many people would do it? With every advance of technology, something like this becomes more of a reality, and a legitimate example of the fear of art experienced by Plato.

Divinely Inspired Art

In *The Symposium*, Plato proposes another idea about art, similar to his previous proposals, yet not quite so sinister in character. The artist does indeed copy reality, but not the reality we see in the everyday world, but instead Formal Reality. Art is in fact a divinely inspired copy that is better than the reality around us; thus art is better than what can be found through experience, and the artist might be considered a prophet of sorts, describing the Will of God.

This is quite a switch from the idea that art is essentially a useless copy, because now it seems that Plato is placing art on a higher level than just about anything, including science and any sort of empirical knowledge. If God really does give artists (some of them, anyway) the inspiration necessary to create good artwork, then why would we ever want to look at anything besides art? There would be no real reason to pursue anything

other than art, nothing to do besides create art, and nothing to appreciate except art. I'm sure Plato wasn't this extreme, and it is entirely possible he was being a bit deceitful when he made that statement concerning art, but taking things people say to their logical, ridiculous conclusions is what philosophy is all about.

Going back to our previous example of World of Warcraft, what if the programmers involved in the game were in fact divinely inspired to create it, and in effect making a world that more closely resembled the ideal reality. Would it not be a disservice to them to ignore their creation as merely a child's game? In fact, one would be better off existing solely within World of Warcraft since experiences there would be more real than those in the physical world. The programmers designed World of Warcraft should be seen as genius-sociopaths who are trying to do nothing more than enlighten the world around them with the truth, and who are giving people an easy to achieve knowledge of that truth with visualizations, i.e. art. Unfortunately, this leads us back to a claim made earlier.

Programming and computer games are dangerous yet again

If art in general, and programming specifically, is divinely inspired, at least on some level, how could it possibly be dangerous? Suppose a World of Warcraft programmer was in fact evil. It is entirely possible that given the numerous individuals who are responsible for the game that at least one of them in some position of power has at least a modicum of malcontent. This individual might change things to a state where they are exactly opposite of whatever was divinely inspired, an anti-good, or perhaps anti-art

even. Their goal might be simply to cause chaos, disorder and to breed hate and contempt for everything. It could be argued that a game such as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas does this at some level. Envisioning a world wherein the game player can inflict pain on others is the goal of GTA, and possibly the product of someone who only wishes pain on others in reality. The role of the artist in the case of the divinely inspired muse moves from “guy who makes bad paintings in his garage” to “someone whose views should be respected and followed”. If a programmer as artist created a game with the prospect of making others suffer, using this thought process he could very well succeed. Using a more cartoonish example, suppose there is a programmer who is evil on the level of Lex Luthor. Lex is evil in the sense that he envisions the best reality one where he is in charge, a malevolent dictator of sorts. And here we begin another short narrative.

Lex Luthor makes a video game

Blizzard, the company that created World of Warcraft, had made so much money that in the year 2010 they successfully developed immersive technology for computer gaming. While not quite on the level of the Grotto, their technology was pretty close, and it allowed gamers to play at home, in the privacy of their own bedrooms. After a series of ingenious marketing schemes, Blizzard employees were honored as high priests and World of Warcraft was played in conjunction with religious services. Their pervasive suggestions that their art was divinely inspired was so successful that the CEO of Blizzard was more powerful than the Pope in religious stature, and some thought he might have been the next messiah. Needing blood for their next project utilizing the new

technology, they placed an ad in the local newspaper and hired an older bald guy who just happened to be a super genius. His name was Lex Luthor.

Lex taught himself computer programming over the weekend after seeing the Blizzard ad. He realized this was the perfect opportunity to exploit the mindless masses he later enslaves and forces to succumb to his will. While he was not a divinely inspired programmer, everyone in the world thinks that programmers have some direct connection to God, and thus he played that against them.

Lex began at the bottom of the Blizzard totem pole, first implementing some rudimentary drivers and graphics packages. He proved to be so good that he quickly rose through the ranks and was made CFO within five years. During that time, the CEO was canonized and Lex himself was made into a saint. The new product was called World of Verisimilitude, or WoV for short. WoV was thought to be as close reality as possible for humanity, and nearly everyone played the game whenever they got the chance. Lex was in the perfect position to enact his plan.

Having bided his time for many years, Lex flipped a switch on his home computer which began distributing a Trojan that soon infected every system running WoV. The effect of the Trojan was to subtly change the environment of WoV to more accurately portray Lex's vision of reality, a reality where he was overlord and ruler of all. The people playing WoV had placed so much value in the game as a reflection of what was real that when the game informed them that Lex was in fact God, they had no reason to doubt this

fact. Lex was made Supreme Ruler of Earth shortly thereafter and consequently made polygamy legal, marrying Catherine Zeta-Jones and Ashley Judd in 47 million dollar ceremony on the Moon.

Treating artists as prophets is obviously a faulty premise unless there is a way to discern between those with truly divine intervention (and perhaps a good heart?) and those who merely say they are divinely inspired for personal gains.

Aristotle Strikes Back

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle attempts to counter the arguments that Plato makes regarding the dangerousness in the emotional release that art produces. Whereas Plato thinks that the emotions that art produces are best left undiscovered, Aristotle thinks that experiencing those emotions allows us to go through a sort of catharsis, whereby we rid ourselves of the feelings that can cause us to act irrationally or experience unhealthy results. By experiencing art, we release our ill feelings instead of allowing them to build up and cause even greater problems in the future.

I think in this regard Aristotle makes an excellent point. Plato seems a bit unrealistic in that he thinks we should be able to ignore our emotions and instead focus purely on reason and logic (an overstatement to make a point to be sure). Obviously, humans are unable to perform such a task, and we do experience moments of rage, hate, lust, envy,

whatever. For Plato's ideal to be a reality, we would have to become emotionless robots, possibly curtailing any sort of innovation or leaps of thought that he wants us to perform. If we did try to become robots, eventually our emotions would build to the point where we would go on killing sprees and mass chaos would ensue. In Southeast Asia, there is a condition called "running amok" where a native might suddenly go crazy and kill people indiscriminately. We have seen evidence of such acts when an individual "goes postal". Normal, calm, rational individuals who abruptly snap and commit random acts of violence are a product of Platonic thinking regarding the non-release of emotions. On the other hand, Aristotle's line of thought boils down to a situation where an individual has a lot of pent up aggression, say, and sees some artwork that allows them to experience that aggression in one short burst. After this burst, the individual is freed of the emotional baggage and can carry on normally with their productive life. Thus, the emotional release that art provides cleanses society of potential problems, and makes for a safer environment.

Six feet under, covered in concrete

I've argued a few times thus far about how computer games are a form of art, and while some of the arguments have been fairly thin, Aristotle's view on the release of emotions as a benefit of art allows me to make a pretty decent line of reasoning supporting my statements. First, let us visit the Columbine school shooting for a moment. Harris and Klebold murdered twelve students and teachers and wounded many others before their inevitable suicide. This sounds much like the natives running amok amongst the streets in

Malaysia. However, many groups targeted video games as the primary cause of the incident. It was proposed that the violent behavior in video games led the two students to enact their plan, and in fact the whole inspiration for their actions was purely based on those games. This seems absurd on some many levels, especially if seen through an Aristotelian lens (but supporters of Plato probably think this case proves their point extremely well, and they'd have a good case to make in that regard). Why would the emotional release experience in violent games have any effect on the actions of individuals, if in fact these games are artistic in some way and do offer a way to rid oneself of the negative aspects of those emotions?

On the flip side of the equation, we come to Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, which was mentioned earlier. The game centers around the player's character, a recently released felon who was in prison for several years for gang-related activity, mostly drive-bys and drug trafficking (and prostitution, money laundering, the list goes on). All in all, a rather unsavory gentleman of most iniquitous temperament. The player of GTA must direct said individual, whose moniker in the name is CJ (short for Carl Johnson), in a variety of missions, ranging from picking up a cousin from jail to burglary to outright murder. One of the more, uhhh, fun missions...all-right, I do admit the mission is in fact quite entertaining and had me laughing, which proves I am nothing more than a sadistic bastard, yet the fact that I found it funny proves my point even further. So this mission involves CJ's sister, a ghetto tramp of truly epic proportions. The sister, while walking to "school" is treated to a variety of cat calls by construction workers on a job site. Not quite what I'd call uncommon, nor particularly shocking. There have been studies that show

75% of the women who experience cat calls actually like the experience, so perhaps CJ's sister is a bit prude, even while being a prostitute. The consequence of the cat calls involves the sister telling CJ that she was ashamed and that the construction workers "must pay for their actions". Since this is a game, the payment, of course, are their lives. CJ must go to the construction site and procure a bulldozer. Then, while atop of the massive mechanical behemoth, he must begin running over the various workers, one by one. They attempt to escape, but CJ is a quick learner and maneuvers the dozer adeptly, crushing each unfortunate soul beneath the colossal treads. After killing everyone, the entire site is leveled into a parking lot, possibly destroying several million dollars worth of steel and concrete. CJ revels in the fact that all the workers are dead...except the foreman of the site. He emerges momentarily from the Port-a-Potty, only to see the destruction and utter bedlam that was once his meal ticket. Thinking quickly, the foreman reenters the outhouse, confident that his fiberglass cage will protect him from certain doom. Unfortunately, CJ is sadist and delights in the misery of others. The toilet is pushed over into a six foot deep ditch, a rather convenient depth. If this wasn't enough, CJ then proceeds to drive the closely parked cement mixer to the ditch and fills it to the top with industrial strength, fast-hardening concrete. The foreman is buried alive in a foul smelling coffin beneath a few hundred metric feet of rock, never to be heard from again. The law of the streets says you can't let a buster live, and CJ fulfills the law...all because his sister was the object of a series of harmless cat calls.

This deplorable sequence of events occurs not in real life, but a polygonal world that does not exist outside of the minds of those who view it. Is this art? Most definitely, especially

where Aristotle is concerned. While I provided my own views on the mission, that of enjoyment, it is easy to see how playing GTA, a form of interactive art, helps the psyche. Many times people feel frustrated, confused, angry and helpless to deal with the problems they face in reality. Art such as this is an escape, a way to occupy the dark side of the mind with a hypothetically murderous scenario that does not need to leave the living room. The frustrations of every day life are released upon a fictional character in a fictional world, and thus fail to have an impact on real life. Perhaps the greatest strength in this form of artistic experience is that the individual playing the game might understand the true implications of such actions. Since the game simulates reality at some level, and the imitation is fairly good, the player can see just what would happen in a given set of circumstances, enact their most irrational tirade, see the horrid consequences and lose those emotions to the void.

While Aristotle is not around to provide any commentary on games such as GTA, I am certain that their existence is what he had in mind when he meant for art to be an emotional release. There is no doubting that being able to do something sadistic and cruel purifies the spirit in a way that no suppression of desires possibly could. Doing such acts in a way that they have no relevance to real life is exactly what Aristotle envisioned the role of art to provide. Thus, violent video games are nothing more than an Aristotelian means to an end. The Columbine kids probably listened to a lot of heavy metal music, which is known to cause people to kill for the devil; I doubt violent games contributed anything to their eventual demise.

Tragedy of a hero

It's hard to call CJ a hero in GTA, and yet he is in some strange way. He is the protagonist in a complex universe where life is harsh and problems are dealt with directly; perhaps we wish we could deal with our own problems in the same way as CJ, busting a cap whenever called for. However, Plato would have us censor the arts, limiting our ability to see just how a hero falls. Aristotle wants us to experience the tragedy; the tragic hero is a necessity for a functioning society. GTA is performance art of the highest level, I'd say, because instead of merely watching a Shakespearean play where we can relate to Hamlet, yet perhaps don't entirely understand his emotions, we ARE CJ in GTA. We are the ones making the decisions and performing the acts. The tragedy sparks emotions, such as fear and pity, which allows us to recognize the many flaws innate within the hero. CJ is seen not as an evil being, but as a hero who is severely limited in his ability to make better decisions for himself. Seeing the eventual conclusions, the foreman being covered in concrete, we are allowed to realize the awfulness of this proposition, and we are less apt to commit similar acts ourselves. This is a direct benefit to individuals, and society as a whole. GTA can be viewed as an attempt to allow depravity, or it can be seen as pure art with the purpose to eliminate future outbursts of degeneracy.

Parmenides the gamer

After having read *Parmenides: Being, Bounds and Logic* by Scott Austin as part of my Oprah Book Club membership, I thought about how Parmenides might view computer

games and their relationship to art, much less art in general. Parmenides' views on most things devolve into an esoteric account of reality, so it was difficult to discern any sort of true vision of what art is for him, although he did mention Pac-man a few times, which leads me to believe that he enjoyed playing arcade games. There is one quote I can pick out that might shed some light on the subject, at least in a roundabout way:

For never shall this prevail, that things that are not are.

Here it is clear that Parmenides views anything that isn't real as a poor road to travel when discerning facts about reality. Thus it would seem that he might support Plato in that art, as a mere imitation, is a waste of time to pursue. It is entirely possible Parmenides believed that artists were prophets, given his own Proem as divinely inspired from the Goddess, yet this statement undermines that notion. Perhaps he differentiates art, which comes from the artist and the divine, which comes through the artist via the gods, but again this is unclear, and leads to a similar situation that was explicated in the case of Lex Luthor and his evil video game. In the case of Parmenides, perhaps he might call art purely imitation, and divinely inspired works something else entirely different. Again, I am unsure as to how to interpret his statement, but I cannot help but think he would find a painting of an apple as a thing that was not, and yet the writings of a prophet as a thing that was. How to discriminate between the sources of the "art" then is the real problem here. Another quote that adds to the confusion:

For thought and being are the same.

In this case, it looks like Parmenides is saying that whatever is in my mind is true reality. Considering that the artist attempts to codify and produce a physical manifestation of thought, it would seem that while art is in fact an imitation, it is a direct imitation of reality itself. The artist then is a person who seeks to shed light on what reality is and tries to communicate that reality with others. Still, Parmenides, it seems, would tend to dismiss artistic expression as anything other than a feeble attempt at duplicating that which is already in our minds. The notion that art is beauty, and the highest art is essentially the Form of beauty might be appealing to Parmenides, however. Supposing that the artist attempts to achieve pure beauty, and thus truth and the One; I hardly think Parmenides would have a problem with this noble attempt. The idea of transcendence is ineffable, and the artist does his best to give the One a voice. In this light, Parmenides might enjoy artwork as a way to gain levels of understanding of the One. Perhaps each level of understanding is achieved by experiencing good art and then becoming more enlightened.

As I stated, I am unsure as to how Parmenides feels about art, but I imagine he would enjoy computer games, for at least one reason. A game such as GTA, which simulates reality, would essentially give him a tool by which to demonstrate his point. The simulated existence is obviously not real, and thus leads us further from truth since we might begin to imagine situations within the game that cannot exist outside of it. The Grotto game I mentioned earlier would be a prime example of Parmenidean absence of reality in anything other than things that are. In any case, Parmenides was a mystic, and

his mind would be nearly impossible to comprehend, yet I feel as if he would truly appreciate computer games on some level.

A Most Fulgent Conclusion

I did my best to relate ancient notions of art, specifically Platonic and Aristotelian notions, to computer games and programming. I'll stick by my proposition that games are in fact a form of artwork, regardless of content. The most mindless games allow an escape from reality, while there are some games that require deep thinking that results in emotional release or cognitive development. I suppose the most violent of games is analogous to the Coliseum of Rome, but without all the dry cleaning bills. There seems to be a fundamental requirement of the human condition that forces us to engage in aberrant behavior, at some level. If we can engage in this behavior in a virtual existence, this can only be a good thing, as reality is unaffected by our aggressions. For this reason I think that to call games anything other than interactive performance art is to do an injustice to the concepts of art ancient Western philosophy has produced. In hindsight, the relevance of Plato and others to contemporary thought is amusingly applicable.