

Chapter 6

Bioshock in the Cave: Ethical Education in Plato and in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Plato's cave, when read with attention to its ludic element, provides a model for the way video games can teach ethics. This chapter describes the cave-culture-game, the interactivity of the prisoners of the cave with the shadow-puppet play. It argues that on its own, the cave-culture-game gives insight into the standard reproduction of dominant ideological ethics by most games that have frameworks of ethical choice. The attempted disruption of this cave-culture-game by the philosopher, however, gives additional insight into the ethical potential of video games. To explore this, the chapter provides a close reading of 2K's Bioshock, which shows how video games can teach ethics through disruptive gestures such as the forced killing of a major character.

INTRODUCTION

Plato is arguably the first ethical philosopher (that is, someone who thinks publicly about the meaning of right and wrong) in the Western tradition. Before he composed his dialogues, what was commonly organized under *sophia* ("wisdom") was a great deal closer to what we today call "science" than it was to philosophy. The Greek word *philosophia* in fact appears to be Plato's own coinage for the

real-life practice that lies behind the dialogues he wrote; in that practice, and thus in composing those dialogues, he took his inspiration from the conversational practice of his teacher Socrates, who seems to have been interested almost exclusively in questions of ethics. Plato himself was not disinterested in scientific matters, but his foundation of Western Philosophy began from the systematic elaboration of a position on the question of what it means to be, and to do, good. That sort of theorizing quickly became the sub-field of philosophy that we call "ethics."

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I argue in this chapter that in certain important respects, Plato is also the first video game designer. I make this argument based on a reading of the famous allegory of the cave in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*. The allegory of the cave, as I will explain, portrays society as a group of prisoners whose only view of the world is a shadow-puppet play projected on the cave wall in front of them. In this chapter I show that Plato depicts, in that shadow-puppet play, a cultural practice characterized by a defining element of video games: interactivity.

I argue that because philosophy for Plato is always essentially about ethics and because the allegory of the cave is the charter myth of philosophical education (or, as Plato would have it, education *tout court*), what I will call the game of the cave, analyzed in relation to the ethical structures of modern video games, helps us ask and begin to answer some very subtle questions about what games can do. I argue in this chapter, finally, that games have a power to *disrupt* interactivity that the medium of film, for example, whose interactivity is not immediately apparent, does not have.

Accordingly, this chapter examines several games, and in particular *Bioshock* (2K, 2007), as elaborations of Plato's original design. I seek to analyze specific similarities and differences between what I will define as Plato's game and these modern games to gain some insight into the complex question of how games can teach ethics. In particular, I examine Plato's conception of the connection between ethics and *mimesis*.

In the first part of this chapter, I propose an analysis of the climactic moment of the myth of the cave that takes fully into account its essentially interactive aspect. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss several examples of ethical elements in modern video games, and show that those moments echo Plato's account of the prisoners in the cave. It turns out that the Platonic perspective on those games' ethical moments is pessimistic as to the games' potential to effect

ethical education. On the other hand, I argue that we need not adopt Plato's pessimism to reap the benefits of the cave reading

In the third part of this chapter, therefore, I turn to one game in particular, Ken Levine's *Bioshock*—a game which I argue actually thematizes its own ethical framework. With the help of my analysis of the cave, I argue that the “ludonarrative dissonance” of the game in fact comments upon the game itself as an exercise in ethics, the ethical framework of video games in general, and indeed the ethical framework of culture itself. Through the mechanism identified by Plato, *Bioshock* teaches ethics just like Plato's Socrates teaches ethics in *Republic*, by situating the gamer in an imaginary bind whose ineluctability enacts the lesson.

The Cave as Video Game

A quick review of the Story of the Cave will help begin to make my argument clearer. Socrates, who is both the narrator and the main character of Plato's *Republic*, tells the Story of the Cave to his interlocutors in *Republic* (most importantly including Plato's brothers). Socrates introduces the story as a way of addressing the problem of educating philosophers, a topic to which the characters of *Republic* have been returning again and again in their conversation.

Here it becomes important to remember that Plato wrote almost exclusively in the form of dramatic dialogue, *Republic* included. The basic outward form of every major work by Plato is dramatic, without third person narration unless one of the dramatic characters, like Socrates in *Republic*, does the narration himself. *Republic* is indeed especially noteworthy in this respect because in it Socrates himself tells the story of the conversation that we call *Republic*. Socrates is thus both the narrator and the main character.

It makes sense also to introduce the idea of *mimesis* here, because in fact what Plato does in writing his dialogues may be seen as itself a form

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