
Excerpts from the first Chapter, “Agony (On the Cave)”:  

For understanding this excerpt and the whole chapter, it is important to know that the word “agony” comes from the Greek word “agon” which means “competition.”

In the previous excerpt, Wark describes “you” as a person who comes out of your cave, your game room (or just puts gameplay on pause), “to investigate the assumptions of a real world beyond the game. You turn away from the screen and unplug the headphones. You get up and stagger out of the darkened room, toward the light outside. You are so dazzled by the light that the people and things out there in the bright world seem less real than the images and sounds of The Cave. // Suppose someone, a parent maybe, or a teacher or some other guardian, drags you back out into the light and makes you stay there. It would still be blinding. You could not look directly at things. Maybe the guardian prints out some pics of your family or maybe a map of the neighborhood, to acclimatize you, before you can look at things . . .” (¶003-004). Next you go back into The Cave.

005 You communicate to fellow gamers in The Cave about the outside world of which The Cave is just a shadow. Or try to. Plato: “And if the cave-dwellers had established, down there in the cave, certain prizes and distinctions for those who were most keen-sighted in seeing the passing shadows, and who were best able to remember what came before, and after, and simultaneously with what, thus best able to predict future appearances in the shadow-world, will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honor?” You bet! The Cave is a world of pure agon, of competitive striving after distinction. But suppose you are that rare, stray, thoughtful gamer who decides to try this new game of getting beyond the game [coming out of The Cave] one more time? Suppose you emerge from The Cave and decide to take stock of the world beyond? You find that this other world is in some curious ways rather like The Cave. The pics of family, the map of the ’hood, seem made of the same digital stuff as your favorite games inside The Cave. If there is a difference, it may not be quite what it seems.

He goes on to say that “the world outside” is really not so different:

006 . . . The whole of life appears as a vast accumulation of commodities and spectacles, of things wrapped in images and images sold as things. . . . Images appeal as prizes, and call us to play the game in which they are all that is at stake. . . . Agony rules! Everything has value only when ranked against something else; everyone has value only when ranked against someone else. Every situation is win-lose . . . [P]layers are free to collaborate only because they seek prizes in different games. . . .

011 The old class antagonisms have not gone away but are hidden beneath levels of rank, where each agonizes over their worth against others as measured by the
size of their house and the price of their vehicle and where, perversely, working longer and longer hours is a sign of victory... What does it mean that, when you come out of The Cave where everyone is competing, come out into “the Real World,” you find that – everyone is competing!

Outside each cave is another cave; beyond the game is another game. Each has its particular rules; each has its ranks of high scores. Is that all there is? The gamer who lifts an eye from the target risks a paralyzing boredom. Paolo Virno: “At the base of contemporary cynicism is the fact that men and women learn by experiencing rules rather than ‘facts’... Learning the rules, however, also means recognizing their unfoundedness and conventionality... We now face several different ‘games,’ each devoid of all obviousness and seriousness, only the site of an immediate self-affirmation—an affirmation that is much more brutal and arrogant, much more cynical, the more we employ, with no illusions but with perfect momentary adherence, those very rules whose conventionality and mutability we have perceived.” Each game ends in a summary decision: That’s Hot! Or if not, You’re Fired! Got questions about qualities of Being? Whatever.

No wonder games choose to spend their time holed up in The Cave. Here at least the targets really are only polygons and the prizes really are worthless, mere colors and numbers. These are not the least of its merits. And yet The Cave is a world you can neither own nor control. ... So by all means necessary, be a gamer, but be a gamer who thinks—and acts—with a view to realizing the real potentials of the game, in and against this world make over as a gamespace. You might start with the curious gap between the games you love and an everyday life which, by the light of the game, seems curiously similar, and yet somehow lacking.