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Reading Response #8

I had first read about the allegory of the cave back in undergrad, the last class I took at Michigan was a study of Plato's Republic. I had no prior interest or experience or experience in philosophy, I took it merely to satisfy my degree's writing requirement, and in fact it seemed rather geared towards law students, but it nevertheless had a profound impact. Ge mentions a few examples (page 404) of technology mediated life, while admiring a shiny cave at a mall. It was only in Ge's lecture this past week that I realized that media was the Latin pluralization of the word medium, that is, the media from which we receive the happenings of the world is a medium where primary sources are distilled and filtered into a narrative report. In my mind, the word media had taken on its own distinct meaning, abstracted away from and unrelated to its original form of, "something that is between or in the middle" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It's interesting to think about the different levels of caves, and how the sum of these overlapping reflections creates a multidimensional, polymorphic cave labyrinth for us to live in.

Extrapolating this concept to digital musical instruments, we could say that we also create a scaled down medium cave for the user. We show them a reality of cause and effect where a press, wave, gesture, movement, biosignal corresponds to a sound and, often, visuals, much as Aristotle's cave dwellers see the shadows and hear the corresponding movements. But with instrument design, or drone design or espresso machine design, there isn't really an exit to those caves, there is not a true, unobscured light of day reality of espresso machines that can be clambered out into (Plato would likely disagree) because there is no one, right, true answer in design. Instead, we should design through the lens of how best can we design this cave for the people trapped inside. Should it simple and straightforward or labyrinthine, with endless choices and deviations. Can the cave dwellers see or change the workings of the cave? How much does it cost to enter and remain in the cave? How does this cave affect the stability of other caves around it? Will the dwellers find meaning in this cave? Metaphor aside, these last two questions are really the heart of this chapter.

The tone of Ge's lecture on this chapter was a fair bit darker than the chapter itself, perhaps reflecting recent current events and his relationship with Smule following this book's publish. Corporate interests would seem to be at odds with nearly every principle of this chapter (book?), in particular 8.2, 8.3, 8.11, 8.14, 8.19. Though recent events have indeed cast a somber glow upon caves of all types, finishing this book I still come away with a positive outlook. Historically, technological advancement was often Darwinian, a necessity borne out of hardship and war: it's terribly cold now we need heated clothes and dwellings, a neighboring village attacked now we need to build walls, the neighbor has walls now we need a catapult, our enemy has nuclear weapons now we need an even more powerful one. Many musical instruments were developed to help soldiers march or direct tactics in battle. Even early electronic music technology like the original Pultec filters of the 1950's were immediate descendants of filters invented for military radio communications in WWII. By comparison, the mere pursuit of profit

seems almost noble. Yet here we are now in a time where a major arts foundation will pay people to create books filled with principles questioning all of this expecting no profit in return. And prestigious universities pay TAs to teach and require students to listen and read these principles for a quarter, and then design whatever they want based on these teachings. The fact that these conversations even exist is sign that, despite everything, we very lucky people living and studying at an extraordinarily privileged place at a very fortunate point in time (at least looking backwards) and, despite recent events, we should all be extremely thankful and go forth serenely into the world.