Gadamer's concept of play

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Introduction

This article discusses Gadamer's[1] concept of play seen from the perspective of computer game theory. My own perspective as an artist working with computer game engines is presented by elaborating the relation between play and art, a relation that Gadamer has also focused on. Gadamer links the nature of play and the nature of art, and explains how the immanent character of play stands in relation to the player and nature. Moreover, he suggests that play and art are closely connected in terms of what we perceive as essential or even true in terms of how our representations of art through imitation extracts the essential qualities of the object we investigate. However, Gadamer's views are far from straightforward since the relations between play, art and truth are both layered and intertwined with each other. I will attempt to clarify Gadamer's theories on play through the exemplification of computer games. How can his concept of play be relevant to our understanding of computer games?

In order to discuss the relation between computer games and Gadamer's concept of play, the first thing we need to do is look beyond the "play" character of computer games as "just for fun". Gadamer appears to have much more serious intentions in mind, namely

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1984).. This paper focuses mostly on his chapter in *Truth and Method* called "Play as the clue to ontological explanation". For the following references I will also refer to the German original text: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, 5. Aufl., durchgesehen und erw. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986).

the seemingly paradoxical notion of the "seriousness of play", which I will come to later in the article. His purpose seems to be to link play with understanding the essence of things. The paradox lies in that to fulfill the seriousness of play, the player has to treat play without being serious.

First of all, and in order to understand what Gadamer means by *play*, we need to know about the double meaning of the German word *Spiel*, which can be translated into both *play* and *game*, in the same way as the word *Jeu* in French. Although *play* and *game* have different meanings, it does not mean that Spiel can smoothly be translated into either *game* or *play*. We need to look further into what distinguishes the terms. Gadamer refers to "the game" [das Spiel] in the definite form or in plural form "games" [Spiele] to signify a differentiation from "play", even though the difference between the two terms is not easily defined. Computer game theory, for instance through the work of Gonzalo Frasca[2], has separated the two terms through looking at their difference in rule structures.

Frasca points out that even though a *game* has a more developed set of rules; *play* also has rules, even though they are often subtle. Frasca's reading of Piaget suggests that *game* rules could successfully be connected to rules that determine victory or defeat. This is not the case for rules in *play*. These are referred to by Piaget as "regularities" and by Frasca as *paidea rules[3]*. Rules in play do not determine whether someone has won or lost, but instead regulate the activity from within. The way to move a chess piece on the board is governed by rules that do not determine victory or defeat, and is thereby considered paidea rules. Using the same argument, we can say that the rules that state when the King is in chess mate are *game* rules.

Frasca like Gadamer considers *game* as a more specific form of *play*: Qualities from *play* are inherited by *game*. Game seems to be treated as a special case of play, a case where victory is determined and the game space is confined by for example a board or a football field. Time is usually either limited or a determinant for victory. In play, on the other

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[2] Frasca also correlates Piaget's "rules" with his own term "ludus rules". Gonzalo Frasca, *Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means for Critical Thinking and Debate.* [web page] (2001 [cited February 2004]); available from http://www.jacaranda.org/frasca/thesis/.
[3] Ibid.([cited).

hand, there is less focus on temporal and spatial properties, even though they might exist, just as in Frasca's argument. To extend this argument slightly, we could say that play and game is distinguished by the extent of *order*. Together they make up a unity of order and disorder[4], which accounts for their importance, but also for their complexity.

Breaking the rules

When the terms *play* and *game* are discussed in terms of computer *game* theory[5], they are usually considered as two different modes of playing: either we have rule-based games or not. So if we consider possible dynamics between *play* and *game*, we may say that a feature of gaming is to feel the need to break the game rules. This breaking of rules can become a fundamental desire when playing computer games. The desire to find a missing feature or bug that give the player an advantage is always there. Conventional games, however, do not have the immanent dynamics that make it possible for the players to break the rules. For example, if we suddenly started breaking the rules in chess, the underlying structure of the game would fall apart, and according to Gadamer it would cease to be a game.

Usually, and because of the impossible task of removing all programming bugs in a computer game, the ability to break rules is not intentional from the game developers. Such is the case for instance with the "hammer jump"[6]. When players in first person shooter games discovered they could shoot into the ground while jumping at the same time, they often used this initially unintended feature to reach places where they could be safer or in other ways gain advantages, even though they would take damage while jumping. This feature turned out to be popular, and was included in later games, this time as an intended feature.

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[4] Sven-Olof Wallenstein for instance writes about game/play in the following way: *"In this sense, play/game imposes itself as the very figure for a kind of transformation of thought. It announces something (the absence of rules or a new set of rules) while also holding it back, marking a kind of limit."* Sven-Olof Wallenstein, *The Name of the Game* [web page] (2002 [cited 1]); available from http://www.ram-net.net/articles/text6.pdf.

[5] Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories? -a Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *GameStudies.org* 1, no. 1 (2001).

[6] The hammer jump is specific to the Unreal games, but similiar examples can be found in other first person shooters as well. Go to: http://wiki.beyondunreal.com/wiki/HammerJump The difference between an unintended feature and a bug could be rather difficult to find without conferring with the game developers.

My point here is not that breaking game rules is the sole reason why we play games, but to point out that rule-breaking activities might be a very essential part of the game experience, both because it is fun and because it gives advantages. If we go back to the example of chess, we could stretch this argument to say that some activities could be considered rule breaking even though they do not formally break the game rules. When I play chess, I try to defeat my opponent by finding solutions that my opponent does not think of, either by hiding my intentions or simply by getting the upper hand by using stronger combinations. When I find combinations that are new to my opponent to such a degree that I get the upper hand, then I have moved into the grey zone between *play* and *game*, between order and disorder. For a brief moment, I treat the game as play by trying to free myself from the game's stringent rules in order to moments later conform to the rules and perform better within them.

In this way we could talk about a kind of oscillation between play and game. The player may balance on the edge of breaking game rules, or more often, paidea rules. For instance, we can think of all the openings in chess that initially have been considered weaker than the known ones by the chess community, only to later prove that they were indeed stronger. That is a way to break rules that might not be formal, but it is certainly an important part of the game experience. To follow the earlier notion of paidea rules described by Frasca, a chess opening could be considered such a rule, equal to the rules that state how to move pieces on the board, in the sense that chess openings regulate a game instead of determining it. To establish a new chess opening or move combination is a way to establish a new regularity or a paidea rule. This argument concerning the duality of game and play within Spiel hopefully shows the complexity of the concept, and that this then would account for much of its usefulness as we will see later on.

The concept of play
Let us return to Gadamer and his concept of *play* for a while and discuss Gadamer's concept of play compared to that of other thinkers. The concept of *play* that Kant and Schiller use is far from the thoughts of Gadamer. Kant grounds the *play* experience in the subject, where *play* could be a way for the subject to express him/herself freely. The

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There are also different definitions within players what is considered cheating or not. Many would say hammer jump is not cheating, while for instance binding advanced key combinations to a single key is.

subject is the instigator of *play*, and the dynamics of *play* is subordinated to the subject, as a latent instrument waiting to serve the subject whenever he/she pleases. With a certain state of mind, a harmony between imagination and reason, the subject could enter a state of *play* for his/her own enjoyment. This view of the dynamics of *play* is almost diametrically opposed to Gadamer's view.

Gadamer criticises what he calls the subjectification of *play*, instead he focus on play itself. He is eager to express disapproval of the importance of attitude and state of mind for those playing. *Play* is rather a "mode of being of the work of art itself"[7]. It is neither constituted by us, nor is it there for our enjoyment. Gadamer does not look at the player and his intentions or needs for recreation, but rather he concentrates on the seriousness of the game itself; a seriousness that is fulfilled through the player's valid intentions. "The mode of being of *play* does not allow the player to behave towards *play* as if it were an object"[8]. The player's role is secondary, or more like a catalyst, a way to instigate *play*'s own purpose. The subjective expression is transposed from the playing subject over to the *play* itself.

This means that Gadamer distinguishes between *play* and the attitude of the player, and that the player is the weaker link when it comes to what constitutes the concept of *play*. The understanding of *play* in the work of art comes from an immanent analysis of the artifact itself, which means going to the artefact for answers instead of to the subject that perceives it. What kind of implication does this have for the understanding of play in contrast to the subjectification of the experience of *play* as viewed by Kant and others? Most importantly, Gadamer's notion changes the object of investigation from the subject over to the *play* itself. What goes on inside our heads when playing is of secondary concern to the more primary function of the actual *play*.This not only reduces the player to a puppet, or catalyst, it also enables Gadamer to connect his concept of *play* to other categories, the most important of these being truth.

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[7] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Page 91. *"Wenn wir in Zuzammenhang der Erfahrung der Kunst von Spiel Sprechen, so meint Spiel nicht das Verhältnis oder gar die Gemütverfassung des Schaffenden oder Genießenden und überhaupt nicht die Freiheit einer Subjektivität, die sich im Spiel betätigt, sondern die Seinsweise des Kunstwerkes selbst."* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. page 107.
[8] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. page 92. "Die Seinsweise des Spieles lä*ßt nicht zu, daß sich der Spielende zu dem Spiel wie zu eimen Gegenstande verhält". Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke. page 108.*

When we try to understand *play*, game, or even more specifically a computer game, it is always a matter of where to look in order to find the answer to our questions. It is evident that the outcome would be significantly different if we discuss the subjective experience in games and use either a subject-based or objectified view of the playing subject. What is the purpose of *play*? Is it to let the subject express itself freely in the grey zone between imagination and reason, or is it to allow *play*'s own self-representation? A subject-based or an objectified view on play are views that are fundamentally different and require different frameworks. It is not surprising that research on computer games has had a dominant focus on the understanding of the subjective experience of *play*. Since computer games are commercial products with enormous gross income worldwide, it is much more important for the industry to understand how people experience the games, that is, products, rather than understand play's relation to ontological explanation. An insight in the subjective experience of playing yields valuable information about their product. In my view, however, which in this case tallies with Gadamer's, I think that a too narrow view on play's subjective character could prevent the search for the dynamics of play.

Play and seriousness

Furthermore, *play* has a rather complex relation to what is considered *serious*. While *play* can never be serious according to Gadamer, he describes that seriousness in *play* is coming from within, and that it is not released until *play* is treated as not serious. "Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play."[9] The attitude of the player always strives towards *play*'s own seriousness, which can only be reached through unserious *play*. Here lies an important quality of *play* that accounts for its fascination: *play* can never be looked upon as an object or from the outside, since it would then immediately lose its own seriousness and purpose. An outside-in view will implode the structure of play. Furthermore, the player can never be aware of *play*'s own seriousness, since it can not be grasped through the experience of *play*. This would become a performative inconsistency: the act of understanding the wrong things would repel what is understood. The important outcome of this relation between *play* and the player is that

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[9] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Page 92. *"Nur dann erfüllt ja Spielen den Zweck, den es hat, wenn der Spielende in der Spiel aufgeht"* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*. Page 108.

the object of inquiry is neither the player's experience nor the player's reflection on what *play* is, but rather it is *play* itself that should be investigated, or what Gadamer calls "the mode of being of *play*" [die Seinsweise des Kunstwerkes selbst]. Gadamer inverts the relation between the player and *play* by giving *play* the role of subject. The player then is objectified. *Play* is independent of the consciousness of the player - it has its own essence.

Seriousness and narrativity

The intriguing argument that Gadamer presents on the seriousness of *play* raises some issues that I think could be considered relevant for computer games. The thin line between what is defined as a game and what is not is connected to the seriousness of play – the intentionality of play determines whether it is play or something else. What if we link this argument to the narratology vs. ludology debate[10], where there seems to be a rather strong demarcation line between *to play* and *to tell*? Computer game theorists like Jesper Juul suggest that there is a fundamental difference between narrative and ludic phases in computer games[11]. We *play* a game and we *tell* stories, and never shall the two be mixed.

However, the narrative elements of computer games are indeed visible, as exemplified by the "cut scene". The cut scene feature is very common in computer games. It makes up the transition state between two interactive sections, often by a narrative that breaks up two different levels in the game. The game is not dependent on player input in a cut scene. Instead, the narrative setting and also the player's progress in the narrative are established. The player is not playing; the game is no longer a simulation, but a representation that the player is watching. Is the player still able to stay within the illusion of the game? Are the players unserious enough to take part in the seriousness of *play*? I think not. In fact, I suspect that cut scenes and equivalent breaks in the game illusion disrupt the game experience, much like a phone call does. This disruption equals a state where the player treats *play* as an object, that is, the player treats it as serious. The aforementioned outside-in view on play becomes predominant in the cut scene. Apart from serving as a break that sometimes is long awaited, and being a reward when the

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[10] Gonzalo Frasca coined the term ludology in order to encompass the specific properties of computer games. He then contrasts this term with narratology: http://www.jacaranda.org/frasca/ludology.htm

player has succeeded in doing something that is good for progress, the cut scene is most often a layer upon the game that is not useful for the game illusion.

However, there are examples that must be said to be very effective when it comes to keeping the player inside the illusion, also during cut scenes. The problem of keeping the player within the illusion is solved in many different ways: In Max Payne 2, the cut scenes consist of comic strips that suggest a progression that is an extension of the player's actions. Even though the player does not provide input or manipulate the game through direct action, the cut scene serves as a *metaphor* for player manipulation. The methaphor lies in the player's identification with the character in the game. Cut scenes where the character in the game acts on behalf of the player is easier to identify as a metaphor for play. In Max Payne 2, however, we get insight into the thoughts of the character through a voiceover that broadens the understanding of the game character, which could be just as effective as if the player acts directly through input. At least my view on cut scenes is that those cut scenes that fail to present the player with a metaphor for play, will also fail in providing a game illusion. This metaphor could be more or less effective, as in any other storytelling. In some cases, the cut scene can prevent the player from dropping out of the illusion of *play*, even though the player does not actually play anything.

I have now examined a few interrelated concepts that are important for us to understand in terms of Gadamer's concept of play. Firstly, "Spiel" contains a double character through the double meaning of "game" and "play". The dynamics between the two terms is driven by rule-systems and the way these appear as strong or weak. We have seen how rule-breaking can disrupt and challenge the relation between game and play in computer games. I have also discussed the relation between a subject-based and an object-based view on play. In Gadamer's critique of Kant, we see a movement from a view where play's essential purpose lies within the subject to Gadamer's views where play's purpose lies within play itself. This seems to be a key to how Gadamer thinks of play in relation to art. Thirdly, the seriousness of play is linked to play being unserious. This paradox defines the boundary between where play ends and where play begins.

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[11] Juul, "Games Telling Stories? -a Brief Note on Games and Narratives."

Play as self-representation

The focus on play itself as containing the key to its own essence is similar to what Gadamer seems to think of art and its relation to aesthetic consciousness. The "mode of being of art" is primary to the person experiencing it, and the work of art is considered the subject in that relation. As we have seen, this coincides with his argument on play. The work of art is an experience that changes a person's experience and not the other way around. What then is left of the personal experience of art, or engaging in play for that matter? Gadamer seems to view the subject experiencing art as a *mediator* enabling the representation of art or play. This does not mean that play is only mediated through the players. The seemingly passive relation between play and the persons playing could be a good reason for degrading the whole experience of play to something forced on the players by play itself, but this is not the case. The player will also benefit from the engagement. Through commitment to play, the player can engage in play by dissolving the object of play into something that is the subject of play instead. Now, when we think of play in the narrow sense, that might not seem significant.

However, Gadamer broadens the definition of play by examining how the word play is used to describe transferred meanings, such as the phrase "the play of light" [Spiel des Lichtes] for instance. According to Gadamer, the way we use terms reveals a relation that at first sight is not directly connected. "The play of the waves" could very well be related to the direct use of play, such as in "children playing" or "playing chess". This connection is not a coincidence for Gadamer, on the contrary, it reveals the objective character of play – that play can exist without the subject's initiative or intervention. The motivation for someone engaging in play would be to take part in an ongoing movement between two states that have no end and renews itself in constant iteration. "The movement which is play has no goal which brings it to an end. The movement backwards and forwards is obviously so central for the definition of a game that it is not important who or what performs this movement"[12]. This someone should not be considered the

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[12] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 93. *"Die Bewegung, die Spiel ist, hat kein Ziel, in dem sie endet, sondern erneuert sich in beständiger Wiederholung. Die Bewegung des Hin und Her ist für die*

usual subject taking part in an objective activity, but the opposite: the object is represented through the subject. From the playing subject's point of view, we could argue that there is no evident reason why the subject should engage in play in the first case. What would be the motivation for the subject to reduce himself/herself to a puppet for the object?

The motivation of someone playing is rooted in the desire of erasing the boundaries between being and playing, much as what Gadamer refers to as "the savage's state". The savage experiences a mimetic relation between being and playing, where there is no image, no metaphor or symbol. Play represents an order of things where there is a repeated movement without goal, effort or strain. "It happens, as it were, by itself"[13]. The person will experience this as relaxation, removing the "burden of initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence". Now we are closing in on the play's essential function, since Gadamer considers play as a natural process where "the meaning of his play, precisely because -and insofar as- he is part of nature, is a pure self-representation"[14]. The attraction of a game is the same as with play. It is the fascination of the game mastering the players by its rules and the dissolution of the playing subject in favour of the game as subject. The properties that separate games from each other stem from the rules that regulate the particular to-and-from movement which Gadamer calls the game's spirit [Geist]. The game is an inert system that is much more determined by the regulations within than by the interactions that lie outside of it. So this means that the subject has gratification from play just because of its passive relation to the outside world or to the playing object.

Even though the players of games are not primary or even necessary for the game, the players can still direct their attention and make intended choices to play. They perform different tasks that are clearly confined within the game's precinct and rules. These tasks are not directed towards anything else than what lies within the game space. Had they

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Wesensbestimmung des Spieles offenbar so zentral, daß es gleichgültig ist, wer oder was diese Bewegung ausführt." Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 109.

[13] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Page 94. *"Es geht wie von selbst."* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 110.

[14] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 94. *"Auch der Sinns seines Spielens ist, gerade weil er und soweit er Natur ist, ein reines Sichselbstdarstellen."* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 111.

been, the game illusion would be broken and the game would cease to be a game. This is what Gadamer means when he talks about games as self-representations, or that the game's mode of being is self-representation. To fulfil the tasks performed in games is not always the purpose of the game, since the game itself has the purpose of self-representation. The play is more important than the fulfilment of the game. If we look more closely at the self-representational characteristic of games or perhaps just look at the result of this characteristic, we see that games can always be represented to *someone*. But games can never be only representation - that would transform the game into a show, and break the spell of the game. The key lies in the game allowing itself to be represented.

Audience as players

Gadamer considers a play in the theatre as a play where one wall of the game's boundaries is down and opened towards the audience. The aim of the game must never be to represent, but to let itself be represented. Similarly such a leakage of representation towards an audience links games with art, which also has the ability to share its self-representation. The openness of games and art is what makes them distinguishable and important, and what constitutes their "medial nature" [medialen Vorgangs]. That is also the reason for claiming that the game does not only encompass the players or the game space, but also the audience. Games acquire their significance through mediation with an audience. The representation of the game is much clearer to the audience than to the player, since the medial nature of the game is directed outwards. A child playing does not have the ability to see the representation of the game, since she is absorbed by the self-representation of the game. There is a slight difference though in relation to, for example, a drama. Here, the actors play a part in a game that could not be fulfilled without the participation of an audience. In fact, to follow this line strictly would mean that the audience could be defined as the players, since they are the ones that are supposed to be fully absorbed into the game. However, the actor plays a representing role, even if there is no audience. The game will always be able to exist for *someone*, even though someone is not there.

Games as art

To further connect play with art, Gadamer describes the way in which play is transformed into art. He calls this process a "transformation into structure"[15]: play goes from a state of *energeia*, an activity, to *ergon*, a work. The importance of Gadamer's argument is that play has the ability to be transformed from having the characteristics of an activity to having the characteristics of work, which correlates with a similar transformation of a work of art from concept to artefact. Another aim of Gadamer's is to argue for the autonomy of play in relation to its players or its creators. This does not mean that the players do not undergo a transformation, on the contrary, the players are transformed to a degree that the identities of the players cease to exist, which is one of the main qualities of transformation. There is no intermediary state between what is transformed and what it is transformed to, and the latter state is the denial of the previous state. The actor of a play has to deny his/her own identity to succeed in fulfilling the game. The actor intends to be someone else, and that someone else is not linked in any way to realms outside of the game.

The same goes for play when it is transformed into structure: what used to be no longer exists, and the new structure that emerges is what is "lasting and true". Hence the transformation of play is not a transformation into something that is temporary or in a transition state waiting to fall back into place, but rather the "redemption and transformation back into true being"[16]. What is true or not is always connected to what we think of as "real" or "reality". According to Gadamer, reality would then be defined as what is untransformed, and the truth of reality is only realized through transforming reality into structure. Art can through the transformation of play into structure become a representation of truth.

The essence through play – closing remarks

If we develop Gadamer's thoughts on art as the representation of what is true, then the key to understanding his arguments could lie in the term "recognition" [Wiedererkennung]. Art's mimetic character is dependent on the knowledge of the

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[15] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 99. *"Die Verwandlung ins Gebilde",* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 116.

mimetic situation. This also applies to play. Without knowledge of play's mimetic character play would be useless and the activity would not be considered play at all. The pleasure of play comes from the knowledge that something is imitated. Gadamer calls this the "joy of knowledge" [Freude der Erkenntnis]. The key to the knowledge of imitation lies in the way we recognize the mimetic situation. We need to recognize what is imitated in order to fulfill the imitation.

However, there is another element in this process, which stretches well beyond the recognition of what we already know. Recognition can also bring with it new knowledge. In fact, Gadamer talks about the recognition of something which is imitated through play or art that brings out the essence of what is imitated: "The 'known' enters into true being and manifests itself as what is only when it is recognised"[17]. Everything that is unessential or accidental about what is represented through play is stripped away and what is left is both the essential quality of what that something is and the ability to grasp the essential through the recognition of imitation. According to Gadamer, "Imitation and representation are not merely a second version, a copy, but a recognition of the essence"[18]. This statement is based on a presupposed connection between what is true and what is a thing's essence, which is not entirely unproblematic. Even though the concept of mimesis has "lost its aesthetic force", Gadamer points out the need to go back to a model that is not centered on the subjective experience. Art is not determined by the awareness of the subject who experiences it: "It is a part of the essential process of representation and is an essential part of play as play"[19]. Art is thereby closely connected to play, and then also connected to the truthful recognition of things.

Gadamer shows us that play is important, not just for the understanding of art, but also for our experience of the essence of things. When we take part in a game, even though we are just playing for fun, or maybe *because* we are playing for fun, it is exactly what

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[16] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 101. *"Erlösung und Rückverwandlung ins wahre Sein",* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., 118.
[17] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 103. *"Das 'Bekannte' kommt erst in sein wahres Sein und zeigt sich als das, was es ist, durch seine Wiedererkennung.",* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 119.
[18] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 103. *"Nachahmung und Darstellung sind nicht abbildende Wiederholung allein, sondern erkenntnis des Wesens."* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 120.
[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*., page 104. *"Es ist ein Teil des* Seinsvorganges *der Darstellung und gehört dem Spiel als Spiel wesenhaft zu.",* Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*., page 122.

makes us able to see things represented the way they are supposed to. What is interesting is that Gadamer's concept of play implies that the act of playing has a higher purpose than immediate gratification. Through play, we can get a glimpse of the truthful representation of things.

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