

# PUTTING SOMETHING INTO PLAY - REFLECTIONS ON VIDEO AS A CREATIVE TOOL IN DESIGN

Vibeke SJØVOLL

Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences

## ABSTRACT

In design, video is typically used as a tool for presentation, instruction, or observation. The use of video for creation and discovery as part of the design process is new terrain. This article explores how video as a tool for creation facilitates artistic expression and critical thinking in design education, and consequently how it “puts something into play”.

This study reports the experiences from a product design course that involved the exploration of the potential of the video medium. One of the videos produced during this course is analyzed through an initial description and further explored by semi-structured interviews with the participating students. One unpredicted outcome of the analysis was that the projects incorporated the element of play on multiple levels. Furthermore, it suggests that the use of video as a sketching tool to explore a design task encourages an experimental approach, and testing of ideas in real-life situations with real people.

The study mainly reflects on how video as a tool of creation can put things into play in design education. This is explored in light of aesthetic theory, with particular reference to Hans Georg Gadamer’s idea of art as play in his book *Truth and Method* [1]. The findings suggest that the unexpected effects of putting something into play support discovery of things not already known.

*Keywords: play, video, aesthetic practice, design, art, education*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Video as a creative tool

In terms of both conceptual and visual experience, video as a medium offers multiple channels for discovering and expressing aesthetic ideas. The most in-depth exploration of the inherent qualities of video is commonly found in fine art. In product design, video has mostly been seen as a tool for the presentation of concepts or finished projects, as an instructional tool, or in user observation and research. Video has rarely been used as a tool for creation and discovery in the design process itself. This article reports the experiences of first year master students in product design on a course where this potential of the video medium was introduced. These students had no prior experience of using video as a tool or means of expression before this course.

As representatives of the first generation that has grown up with digital media and technology, it seems appropriate that they should develop these skills through the use of video. Given their exposure to digital media culture, they were not offered any formal support in terms of storytelling or use of film and editing software during the project. The only parameter given was, very simply, to make a video in three days based on the exploration of the two terms: camouflage and exposure, in the sense of “exposing visibility. The students were told that, on completion of the video and based on its content and the experiences they had making it they should decide on a product or a task to explore further. The students could, if they wished, continue to use video as a tool in this process. As expected, they already knew or could easily work out how to make a video.

The aim of the task was to explore the use of video as a sketching tool for developing an individual approach to design. The ensuing projects show an experimental and playful attitude, and sensitivity to how much information is needed to highlight some aspect of an object or situation, or to communicate within a given context. It seems that the use of video as a sketching tool to explore the task encourages testing and an experimental approach in real-life situations, with real people. The analysis revealed elements of play on several levels, which was an unpredicted and surprising dimension of the projects. In this article this play element is identified and further explored through theory. The study reflects on

how video, as a creative tool, can put things into play in design education. This is explored through a case study involving concept mapping of the outcomes of a student project, supported by a literature review and semi-structured interviews.

## 2 METHOD

### 2.1 The project

The empirical data for this study comes from original research involving first year students on a master's level course in product design. To begin, the students were divided into groups of five. Their task was to produce a two-minute video during a two-day workshop. As a source of inspiration, the students were introduced to works by three contemporary artists: Liu Bolin's (China) [2, 3] ongoing series of photographs *The Invisible Man*, and photographic works by Ritta Ikonen (Finland) and Karoline Hjort [4] (Norway) entitled *Eyes as big as plates* (2011). Through their work, these artists explore the concepts of camouflage and invisibility in a variety of contexts.



Figure 1. Left image *Eyes as big as plates*, Ritta Ikonen and Karoline Hjort. Middle and right image *The Invisible man*, Liu Bolin [2-4]

### 2.2 Analysis

In the present study, one of the videos made during this workshop is analyzed from an initial description (context mapping) of the video, which is then further explored by semi-structured interviews with the students [5, 6]. It is argued that the chosen theory is relevant for present purposes because the object of the study (the video) represents elements of play on several levels, as part of the processes of both creation and presentation.

#### 2.2.1 The ideas of Gadamer as a basis for the analysis

Art puts something “into play”, and when you play, something is “at play”[1, 7]. The empirical data from an initial description of the video are discussed in light of Hans Georg Gadamer's aesthetic theory, and, in particular, the idea of art as play in his book *Truth and Method* [1]. The theory is found to be relevant for this study because the video represents elements of play on multiple levels of the processes of creation and presentation. In view of the dialogue between practice and theory, it will be useful to consider the hermeneutical tradition more closely, as described in particular by Gadamer. “Hermeneutical aesthetics is dialogical in character. It recognizes that practitioner and theoretician share in bringing a subject matter to light and plays down any theory/ practice division in the arts. Interpretation is a means to a work's realization”[8]. Associations with the game hide and seek, which was introduced as part of the students' briefing, can be found in the photo project *Invisible man* by Liu Bolins, further supporting the relevance of play. In the next section, the relevant aspects of play will be elaborated through the analysis of one of the student videos.

## 3 DESCRIPTION OF THE VIDEO

### 3.1 Putting something into play when doing research by video

The video opens with a panning panoramic view from a cantina. A man is walking past the rubbish bins located next to the cleaning station. The design of the bins is subtle, blending into the surroundings. On one of the bins, the video makers have mounted a large sign bearing the word “rubbish”, with an orange arrow pointing down into the bin. There is no sound, only a small caption

that pops up in one corner with the single word “routine?” This is followed by a frame in which the problem formulation of the task is stated as “How do people react when we challenge the norms of throwing garbage?” This was the students’ first experimental test of user/viewer reactions or change in behaviour caused by a new sign, as the first element of putting something in to play when conducting research through video.

### 3.2 Putting something into play in society

The next section of the film shows a rubbish bin of the kind that uses a foot pedal to open the lid. The bin is decorated with a string of LED lights, and it plays music when the lid is opened. Sound is now introduced, and it is the realistic sound of what is happening in the images. This continues through various clips of something being made in a workshop. The camera focuses on the machines and the technical aspects of craftsmanship, with a focus on aesthetics. The students said they wanted to include this because it seemed of value for the viewer to know how things are made, as well as to prove that they had met the specified requirements for the task. As an example, one shot shows a circular sawing blade as it is elevating, which to an imaginative eye might be seen to resemble a rising sun. More and more details of what is being produced are gradually revealed, and we see a sign being produced of a person throwing something up in the air. Finally, we see the finished product: a large rubbish bin has been reimagined as a basket net fitted high on a wall, with the sign of a person throwing something into it. However, the most direct reference to putting something into play emerges in the last part of the film, introduced by a slide bearing the text “reactions?” The images are from an outdoor city environment in the evening; we again see the spectacular pedal bin, but relocated to a path in a city centre park. In the evening dusk, a passer-by is investigating it, and when the lid is opened, the lights come on and music begins to play. Surprisingly, the passer-by picks up the bin and takes it with her. On the soundtrack, we can hear the students’ reaction to this: their laughter tells us that they found it humorous and unexpected, relating in this instance to putting something into play *in society*.

### 3.3 Putting something into play by changed behaviour

The students then say let’s continue with stage two. This sequence includes music, and shows the rubbish bin as a basket net being installed next to a small kiosk selling doughnuts. A camera is fitted on top of the rubbish bin, looking down into the basket and to the street below. In a style that suggests a music video, we now see different people attempting to throw their rubbish into the basket. The last images show several direct hits straight into the basket. We can hear the sounds of throwing, talking, and people sounding enthusiastic. Caught on the camera from the basket, we can also see a woman filming the installation. In the interview, students commented that passers-by seemed curious, pausing briefly to look. The more playful among them picked up rubbish from the ground and aimed at the basket. This stage explores putting into play in terms of *changed behaviour*, triggered by a product an unexpected context.



Figure 2. Video stills from student video with basket rubbish bin, 1. MA, 2012/13

In summary, the video demonstrates the philosophical and reflective aspects of play as activated on three levels: putting something into play when doing *research by video*; putting something into play *in society*; and putting something into play through *altered behaviour*. In the next section, we will consider the relevant aspects of Gadamer’s theory on the playful aspects of making art.

## **4 CONSCIOUS AESTHETICS AND PLAY**

### **4.1 Play as practice**

The metaphorical use of the term “play” is familiar to us in everyday usage; we say that the light plays on the water surface, or the wind plays with her hair. In this context, backward and forward movement is important for our understanding of play. Gadamer observes that humans play in the same way as nature, which provides a model for art by conducting its play purposelessly, repeatedly, and effortlessly [1]. The freedom in such play is not, however, without risk: indeed, the possibility of failing is a large part of a game’s attraction, as the player is at the mercy of the rules and the situation within the game. Where “to play” is associated with a certain lightness, purposelessness, and lack of seriousness, Gadamer’s analysis of the nature of a game shows otherwise. “The person that does not take the game seriously destroys the game” [1], and to play a game demands full and serious attention if it is to keep its characteristics intact: “What constitutes fair or foul play depends upon a set of pre-understood principles just as what is esteemed excellent in art requires normative expectancies of appraisal” [8]. Art does not usually quietly follow conventions or meet expectations—on the contrary, it proposes other rules to follow and offers different perspectives. “Art’s primary concern is to present a commentary or an alternative perspective to society” [9]. And whereas Kant attributes a non-purposive rationality to the aesthetic attitude, Gadamer attributes it to the playful process of art practice itself [8].

### **4.2 Play in society**

The social boundaries of play rely on an agreed set of rules and time constraints [7]. Furthermore, it includes “a greater attention span and problem-solving abilities” and “understanding of others’ feelings intentions and perspectives and social reciprocity” [10, 11]. Gadamer proposes that both conscious aesthetics and play are activities of mediation, acts facilitating what happens in the *in-between* of artist, artwork, and viewer that constitutes the substance of the work. Seen as an analogy to play, it may be considered that the player, the game (rules, co-players, circumstances) and the spectator constitute this mediation. The player is of less importance here because the game is a realization that refers to itself. He maintains that to play and art are not isolated from life, but an independent modus of being. Both the game and art are constituted in the process of being played and practiced. Through the ability of artworks to bring things to mind and to hint at layers of meaning, it functions essentially as a language. Yet Gadamer acknowledges that linguistic means of expression are inadequate to the task of conveying what occurs within an experience of art. Gadamer states that “‘conscious aesthetics can elicit activation on a limited or very broad level regardless of materials or tools used for the creation’” [8].

### **4.3 Play as approach towards new ways of acting**

The notion of play as an independent modus of being whose purpose is to be what it is and represent what it does—whether in a play, a musical improvisation, painting, or poetry—is that it needs to be seen, but has its own autonomy. “The game analogy also serves to undermine approaches to art which are exclusively intentional, material and conventional” [8]. This approach supports emancipation from material and craft traditions in aesthetic practice and it opens up for the philosophical and cognitive sides of aesthetic practice. “Such transformative power implies recognizing in a work what was previously understood of a subject-matter, but transformed, as if seen for the first time” [8]. This situation, however, is always moving: according to Gadamer, the life of any such subject matter is one of change and development: “The hermeneutical process claims that through repeated re-working and re-interpretation a subject matter not only accrues more aspects but also, in so doing, they allow that subject-matter to become more fully what it is” [8]. Perspectives of play offer a means of including or even preparing for the unexpected, and of creating change by the altering of rules or conventions. The idea of art as play leads us to the possibility that every artwork can be the starting point for new ways of seeing and acting.





Figure 3. Putting something into play, play's role in aesthetics and plays role in play

## 5 REFLECTIONS ON THE PLAY ELEMENT

The video analysis above reveals how a playful and experimental approach to a task can enable students to discover previously unknown resources within themselves, and within the project. Most importantly, as described, the study demonstrates the actions and reflective aspects of play that were found in the project on several levels. Gadamer's descriptions of the characteristics of play as an in-between space, between reality and fiction has opened a fruitful perspective in aesthetic practice. This can contribute with supplementary views on didactic practices within product design studies through surfacing new perspectives from which to act. Furthermore his perspective of *play* as an understanding of something that can challenge our inventiveness within certain frames can open up to the unpredictable. As the students said, the project opened up to the discovering of things that they had not already plotted out or anticipated as interesting for the study. For example, the fact that the first rubbish bin was stolen by the very first person who saw it could not have been predicted, and might easily have diverted the project in another direction. The accidental and unplanned nature of putting something into play is an important aspect of discovering what you don't already know—perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of play, from a designer's point of view.

## 6 REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF VIDEO

Video is a medium that is used in society and in cultural industries, whether for marketing purposes, documentary journalism, artistic use (such as music videos), or personal and private use. It is non-exclusive and in a sense limitless and, like any other technology, it is constantly changing and adapting. Using video also strongly connects with the visual culture that surrounds the students in their everyday life, as digital technologies constitute a significant part of the language through which we express ourselves. The student projects show an experimental and playful attitude; this might be due to the nature of visual and multimedia language, which offers a range of communicative and expressive facets that appeal to the use of several senses and the imagination. "Imagination helps to provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge; it is an apparatus through which people make sense of the world" [12]. The impact of technology on individuals, communities and the artist's role are articulated in an article on new media by Remko Scha:

Media technologies are super-artworks. They articulate the space of artistic possibilities so explicitly that creation is reduced to choice. A technology is like a score which prescribes the structure of a piece for the greater part, but grants the performer some license. Media artists are performing artist. The composer is the designer of the medium[13].

It seems clear that the use of video as a sketching tool to explore the task encourages testing and experimenting in real-life situations that involved real people.

## 7 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

The aim with the student task was to explore the use of video as a sketching tool for developing individual design approaches. The findings show that the use of video as a sketching tool to explore a design task encourages the students to interact with each other and society in a direct way. The student projects show an experimental and open attitude, and sensitivity to how much information is needed in

order to draw attention or to communicate in a given context. The study suggests some implications for design research and education, identifying the play element engendered by the use of the video as a useful part of the creative process. Play as practice, play in society, and play as formation for new ways of acting are the key issues elaborated within play theory and aesthetic research as they relate to the student projects in this article. The theory of aesthetic hermeneutics outlined in this article has its origins in a discussion on art and play, but goes beyond the position of art to look at play as a formation on a more general level. The hermeneutic approach requires one to engage with the object of interest (artwork or person) on the basis that it has something to convey that you don't already know [8]. This paper sheds light on the position of play in the making process, in research, and in the reception stages of a project, and suggests that perspectives of play can usefully be encouraged in design education and in design projects generally. Play offer means of including the unexpected, and of creating change by changing rules or conventions. The unpredicted elements of putting something into play in a given context provide support for discovering things you do not already know.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Gadamer HG. *Truth and Method*: Continuum; 2004.
- [2] Bolin L. *The Invisible Man*. 2011.
- [3] Bolin L. *The Invisible Man*. 2014.
- [4] Riitta Ikonen KH. 2012. Available from: <http://www.oftheafternoon.com/riitta-ikonen-eyes-as-big-as-plates/>.
- [5] Yin RK. *Case study research : design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage; 2009. XIV, 219 s. : ill. p.
- [6] Maxwell JA. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*: SAGE Publications; 2005.
- [7] Huizinga J. *Homo ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press; 1955. 220 s. p.
- [8] Davey N. Gadamer's Aesthetics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.) ed: Winter 2011 Edition; 2007.
- [9] Horkheimer M, Adorno TW, Sundland A. *Kulturindustri: opplysning som massebedrag*. Oslo: Cappelen; 1991. 78 s. p.
- [10] Freeman s. *Some fundaments of human-artifact behavior*. 2013.
- [11] Miller JR. *Encyclopedia of Human Ecology: A-H*: ABC-CLIO; 2003.
- [12] Kaihovirta-Rosvik H. *Images of imagination: an aesthetic approach to education*. 2009.
- [13] Balkema AW. *Exploding aesthetics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi; 2000.