

# **PUTTING SOMETHING INTO PLAY— USING VIDEO AS A CREATIVE TOOL IN DESIGN**

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## **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 of product design students during a course that introduced them to the potential of the video medium. One of the videos produced during this course is analyzed through an initial description of the video, further explored by semi-structured interviews with the participating students. The research question asks how video as a tool of creation can put things into play in design education.

One unpredicted outcome was that the projects incorporated the element of play on multiple levels. The disclosed element of play is further explored through aesthetic theory, with particular reference to Hans Georg Gadamer’s idea of art as play in his book *Truth and Method* [1]. It seems clear 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 findings suggest that the unexpected effects of putting something into play support discovery of things not already known.

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

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### ***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, they should make a product based on its content. 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 a 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. Here, this play element is identified and further explored through theory. The research question asks 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 masters 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.

#### 2.21 *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 chosen theory is relevant here because the chosen video represents elements of play on several levels of the processes of creation and presentation. In respect of the dialogue between practice and theory here, it will be useful to consider more closely the hermeneutical tradition, 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.

### 3.0 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 behavior 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 reimaged 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 center park. In the evening dusk, a passerby is investigating it, and when the lid is opened, the lights comes on and music begins to play. Surprisingly, the passerby 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 behavior

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 passersby 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 behavior*, triggered by a product an unexpected context.

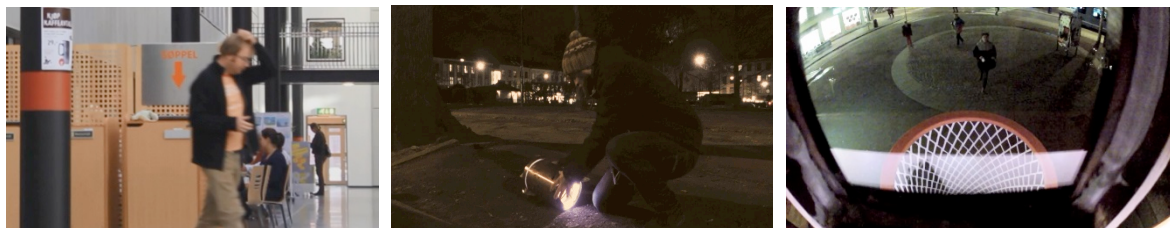


Figure 2. Video stills from student video with basket rubbish bin, I. MA, 2012/13

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 behavior*. In the next section, we will consider the relevant aspects of Gadamer's theory on the playful aspects of making art.

## **4.0 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 “Comprehending a game or an artwork requires an appreciation of the appropriate rules or conventions” [8]. 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 makes 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. Gadamer outlines a notion of art as representational play whose purpose is to be what it is, and to represent what it does, outside the subjectivity of its participants (either actors or audience). When art is no longer perceived as part of the intention or the history of the artist, the insight offered becomes more accessible from a societal point of view. Freed, so to speak, from the connotations institutionalized art in a position *in-between* reality and art, it constitutes its own temporary reality that Gadamer calls a formation. We will consider this proposition in more detail in the next section.

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

The notion of play as a formation 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. This is what Gadamer describes as a formation; he does not suggest that a game changes things into variations of itself, but that the completed formation has a new and independent existence. What was before does not exist any more, and this new being is the formation we need to accept as constituting the experience [1]. “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 formation, 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]. Again, “A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to that it enriches the being of that as if through a new event of being” [1]. The idea of art as a formation leads us to the possibility that every artwork can be the starting point for

new ways of seeing and acting. A formation, in this context, works as a perspective through which we can act and explore the world.



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

## 5.0 REFLECTIONS ON THE PLAY ELEMENT

The video study 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 philosophical and reflective aspects of play that were activated by the project on several levels. From Gadamer's descriptions of the characteristics of play, a space an in-between space, between reality and fiction opens up a new perspective from which to act. From this position, the outside world can look at what is taking place in the formation, and perhaps interact with it, and the players can also act upon the world or communicate from this same position. As the students said, video opened them up to discovering 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.

## 6.0 REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF VIDEO AND PLAY

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. 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 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” [12].

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.

## 7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

The aim with the task was to explore the use of video as a sketching tool for developing individual design approaches. The findings confirm that the use of video as a sketching tool to explore a design task encourages testing and experimenting in real-life situations, with real people. The student projects show an experimental and playful attitude, and a sensitivity to how much information is needed in order to draw attention to an object or situation, 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 here. 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 formations of play can usefully be encouraged in design education, and in design projects generally. Formations of play offer a 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 don't already know.

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