



## Nature as the site of hermeneutical play

### Description

Metaphors can be playful, and observers of nature commonly refer to metaphors of play: “we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, and the play of gnats” (104). This is a passing reference to play in nature by the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer as he affirmed the importance and ubiquity of play. He is keen to point out that play is not really under the control of the players. It is as if we players are played by the game. Play plays us, as it were.



Play is not only in nature. He extends his examples to “the play of gears or parts of machinery, the play of limbs, the play of forces.” He then adds, “The movement backwards and forwards is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement” (104), as if to say the players are played by the game.

For Gadamer play provides a metaphor for understanding the process of interpretation. He is keen to point out that “s not the same as saying play is *just* a metaphor. To assert that something is a metaphor does not diminish its authority as a description of the way things really are.

A few paragraphs further on in this section on play, Gadamer asserts that there “s really no difference whether we are speaking literally or in terms of metaphor.

“The fact that the mode of being of play is so close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals *too* play, nor is it correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play *as well*. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that *man* too plays. His playing too is a natural process. The meaning of

his play too, precisely because *he* and insofar as *he* is part of nature, is a pure self-presentation. Thus in this sphere it becomes finally meaningless to distinguish between literal and metaphorical usage (105).

Play and nature share the same mode of being. So play really is everywhere. Play is something we get caught up in, all the more evident when the player loses himself in play (103).

I think there are many lessons here not only about interpretation, meaning, nature, agency and the character of game play, in terms of repetition, levels, progression, realism, sociability, ethics and meta-game play. I elaborated on these themes in [Cornucopia Limited](#), and summarised them in a blog post: [Game noir](#).

It is convenient that the words *nature* and *play* are so ambiguous, i.e. they are so amenable to word play. Play is not *just* a metaphor for understanding nature, but nature is in play, it is natural to play, and that is the nature of play: ideas worth playing around with.



## Reference

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum. Second, revised edition. Originally published in German in 1960.

## Note

- First image is a beach in Corsica, the second is the olympic cauldron at the London 2012 Olympics.

## Category

1. Nature

## Tags

1. hermeneutics
2. interpretation
3. play

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## Author

rcoyne99