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CLEA Seminar

Bracketing and Immersion: The Dynamic Interplay of Play

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About us



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Play(fulness) and life

- “Life (aion) is a child at play, moving pieces in a game.”
(Heraclitus, Fragment B52)
- Creative play as the highest form of human activity.
(Nietzsche, *The Three Metamorphoses*)
- The Zen Buddhist idea of enlightenment where all activities become playful (“playful samadhi”, 遊戲三昧).

Immersion



Photo credit: David McNew / Getty Images

Lusory attitude: “the acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur.”

— Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (2014, p. 43)

“Bracketing”



Epoché = suspension of judgment

= “bracket” or “put out of play” our belief in the rules that govern our everyday practical life.

—Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, 1913

Proposal 1

Play = Bracketing + Immersion

Bracketing and Immersion

- Play involves both bracketing and immersion.
- Bracketing (suspending judgment) is the “negative” procedure of **taking a distance to one’s belief** in the rules of the everyday practical world.
- Immersion is the “positive” procedure of fully adopting a new set of rules and **becoming physically and mentally absorbed** in the new virtual world.
- Bracketing is usually not explicit, but we are always effectively bracketing when playing.

Proposal 2

Playful Meta-Attitude = Interplay of Bracketing + Immersion

Bracketing to counter attachment

- How to avoid getting too attached or too detached?
- We get too attached when we become overly invested in play to the point that the play world becomes our sole world (problem of addiction).
- Most detrimental is that we no longer become playful.
- In order to remain playful, a healthy distancing is necessary.
- By bracketing the rules of the game, we are no longer ruled by them.

Immersion to counter detachment

- But we should also be careful not get too detached.
- We may be able to provide some sort of reflective insight into the game by taking a distance from it, but there is the risk of becoming a detached spectator.
- Sports analyst is not a player!
- Getting in the game and becoming immersed as an engaged player is necessary to be truly playful.

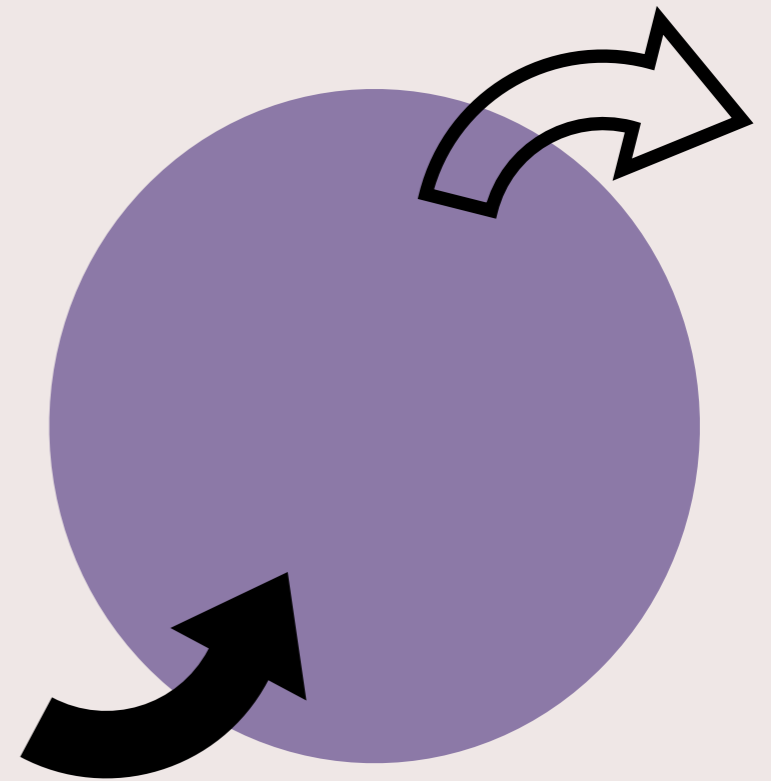
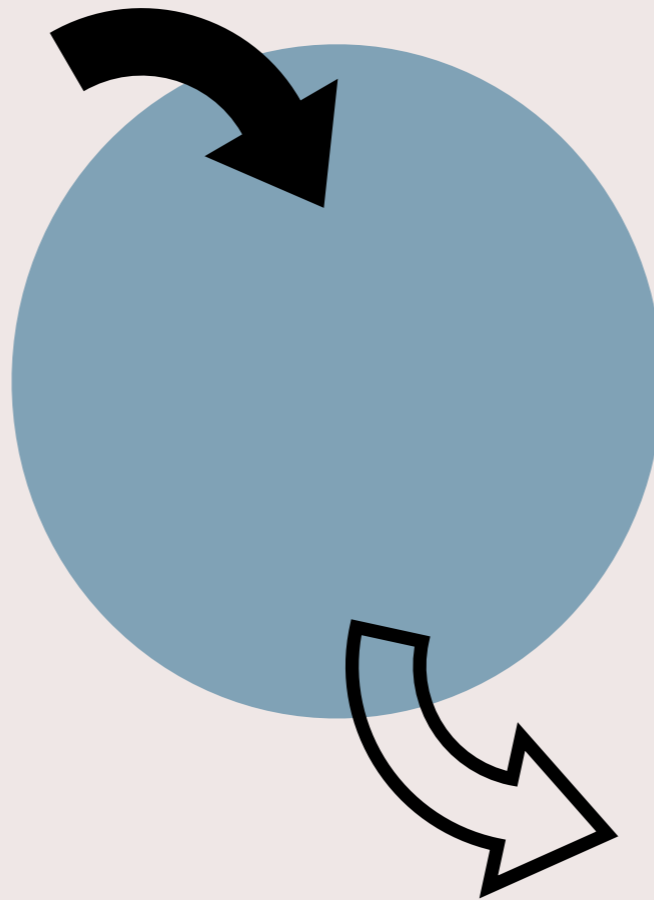
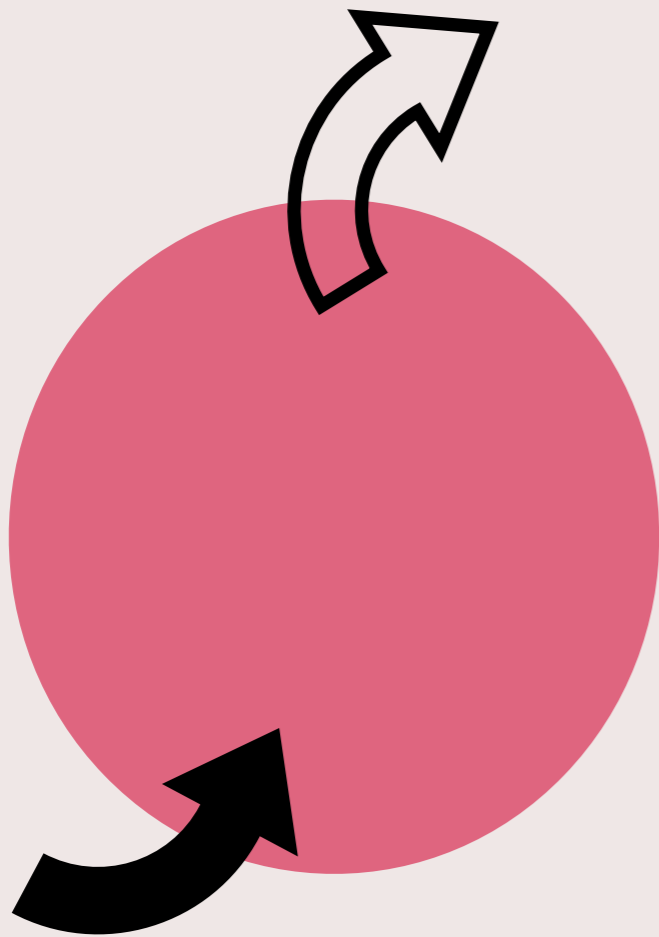
“Going in” and “going out”

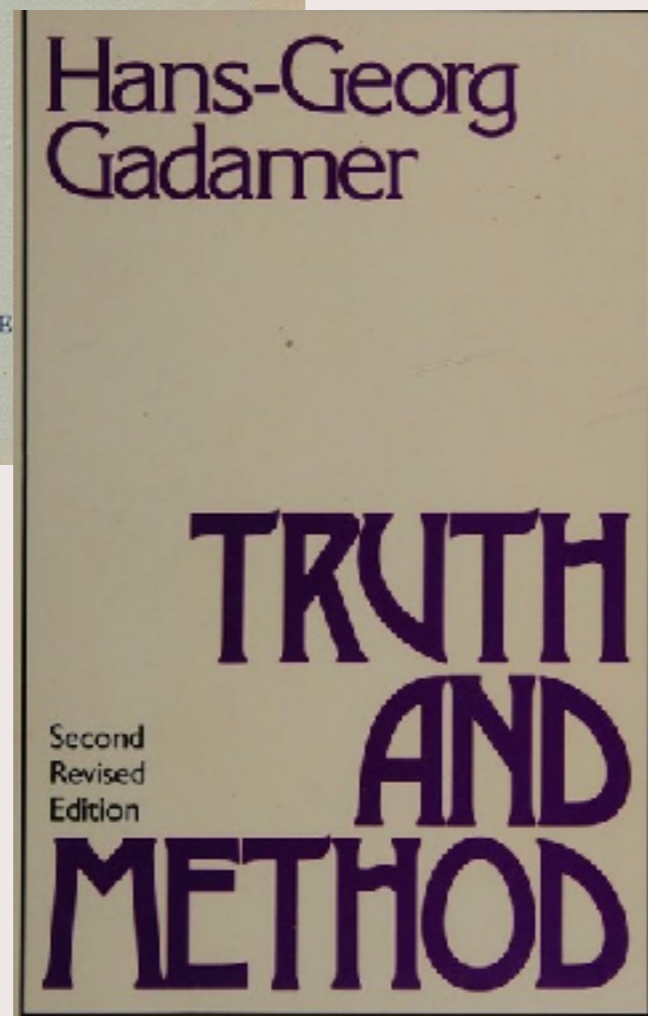
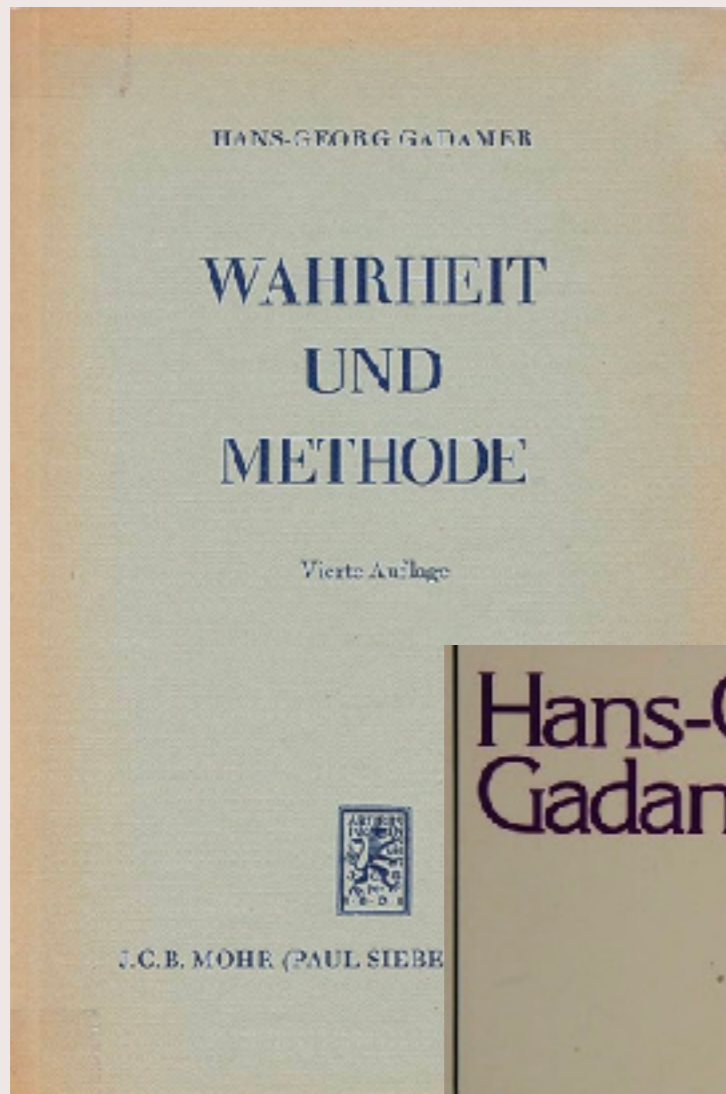
- Playful meta-attitude consists of the ability to freely “**go in**” (**immersion**) and “**go out**” (**bracketing**) of a local virtual world.
- This dynamic interplay of immersion and bracketing is what enables the sustainment of playfulness.
- When this stagnates, the agent either gets stuck in the game and no longer becomes playful (loss of bracketing) or gets out of the game and forgets the real fun of playing (loss of immersion).

Playful Meta-Attitude

Immersion (go in)

Bracketing (go out)





Hans-Georg Gadamer
(1900-2002)

vs. Subjective interpretations

- Kant spoke of the “free play” of the faculties of imagination and understanding in aesthetic judgment; Schiller spoke of the “play drive” that is awakened in the face of beauty.
- Such subjective interpretations of play has led to the “subjectivization of aesthetics.”
- “I wish to free this concept of the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller and that dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man.” (*Truth and Method*, 102)

Gadamer on play

- Taking hint from the metaphorical usage of the word (play of light, play of the waves, etc.), Gadamer defines play as the **“to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end”** (TM, 104).
- **“Play is the occurrence of the movement as such.”** (Ibid.)
- Gadamer goes on to apply this definition of play to our understanding of art, and to human understanding in general.

Play-process of understanding

- An artwork is not an object to be appreciated by a disinterested subject.
- Rather, the meaning of an artwork takes place in the back and forth interplay of the spectator and the artwork.
- Just as the players lose themselves in play in playing seriously, the spectator must participate and submit themselves to the interpretative process.
- Understanding in general is “never a subjective relation to a given ‘object’” (TM, xxviii), but a dynamic movement that takes place in between.

Immersion yes, but what about bracketing?

- What Gadamer emphasizes is play's immersive aspect.
- Understanding involves **engaged participation** in something larger than ourselves.
 - “Primacy of play over the consciousness of the player” (TM, 105).
- Modern sciences (detached observer) vs. human sciences (engaged player)
- But in emphasizing play's immersive character (the seriousness of play), Gadamer underemphasizes the other aspect of play that is equally important: **distancing (bracketing)**.

Ricoeur: Distanciation and appropriation

- **Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)** expands on Gadamer's analysis and discusses the play-process of understanding that takes place in writing and reading, especially fiction.
- Immersing in an imaginary world involves an “**appropriation**” of the meaning horizons of the imaginary world.
- But this is possible because of the “**distanciation**” from our meaning horizons of the everyday world.
- This “distanciation” not only applies to our everyday worlds, but also to our self-identity (“letting-go”, “relinquishment of the subject”).

Playful samadhi in Zen

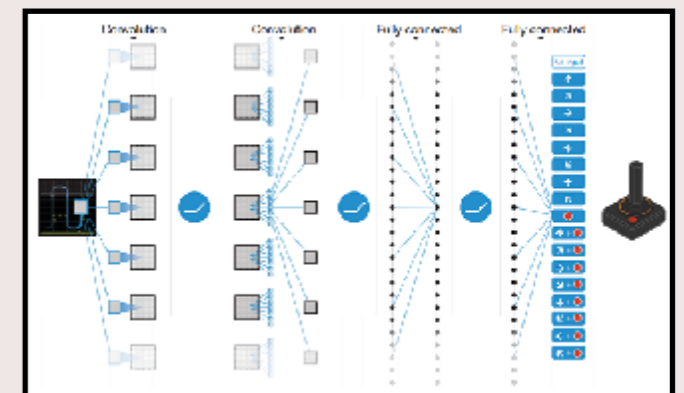
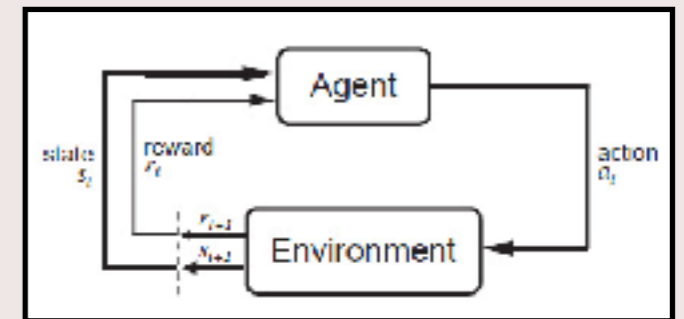
- The emphasis on “bracketing” (especially the bracketing of the self or ego) is widely recognized in Eastern philosophical traditions and Buddhism specifically.
- In Zen Buddhism, “playful samadhi” (遊戲三昧) is an ideal state of the mind where all activities (including work) become playful.
- This is achieved by **letting go of the ego** (the source of all craving) = bracketing the ego.
- All doing becomes an “effortless doing.”

Clarify 'non-play' to understand 'play'

- The dive beyond the space without play implies the existence of such boundary.
- This may require a characterization of an agent's set of goals and sustaining behavior, to understand what goes beyond them.
- Defining 'play' as unstructured, voluntary, and exploratory behavior, while 'non-play' would be structured, obligatory, and goal-oriented activities might not be formal enough.
- This may be **facilitated by a mathematical theory** of all said elements for an agent within a dynamical system, with its **behavior, goals, and their causal and spatiotemporal structure.**

Balance between strong drive and letting go: from philosophy to AI and back

- Wisdom traditions seek to navigate the tension between strong **purpose** and drive (e.g. “Sammā Vāyāma,” Pali for “Right Effort”) and the principle of **letting go**, acceptance, and openness (“Vairagya” in Sanskrit, or “Upādāna” in Pali, meaning “Non-Attachment”), by balancing them through various practices.
- One may search for balance between both, in an analogous way to the **trade-off between exploitation and exploration** in reinforcement learning algorithms. This is harmonized through an approach akin to the Taoist concept of “Wu Wei” (無為, Chinese for “Effortless Action”).
- On the one hand, a strong drive in exploitation maximizes utility based on the current knowledge, while non-attachment in exploration involves taking actions that are not guaranteed to be optimal in the short term but may yield **valuable new paths for the future**.

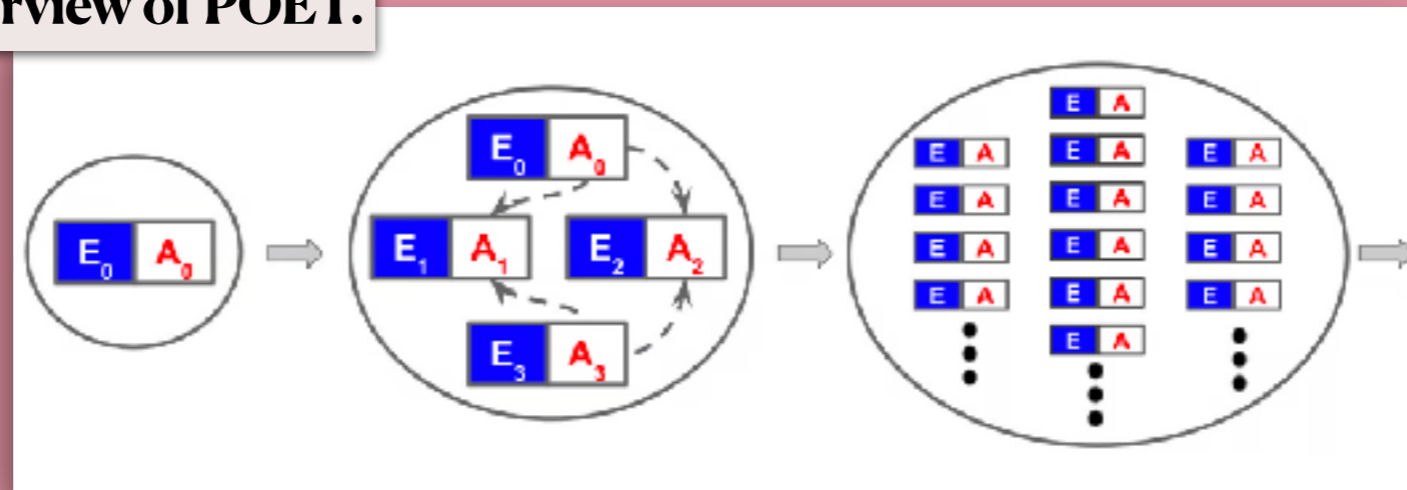


Open-endedness: evolving the player with the game

Figure 1: An example bipedal walking environment.



Figure 2: An overview of POET.



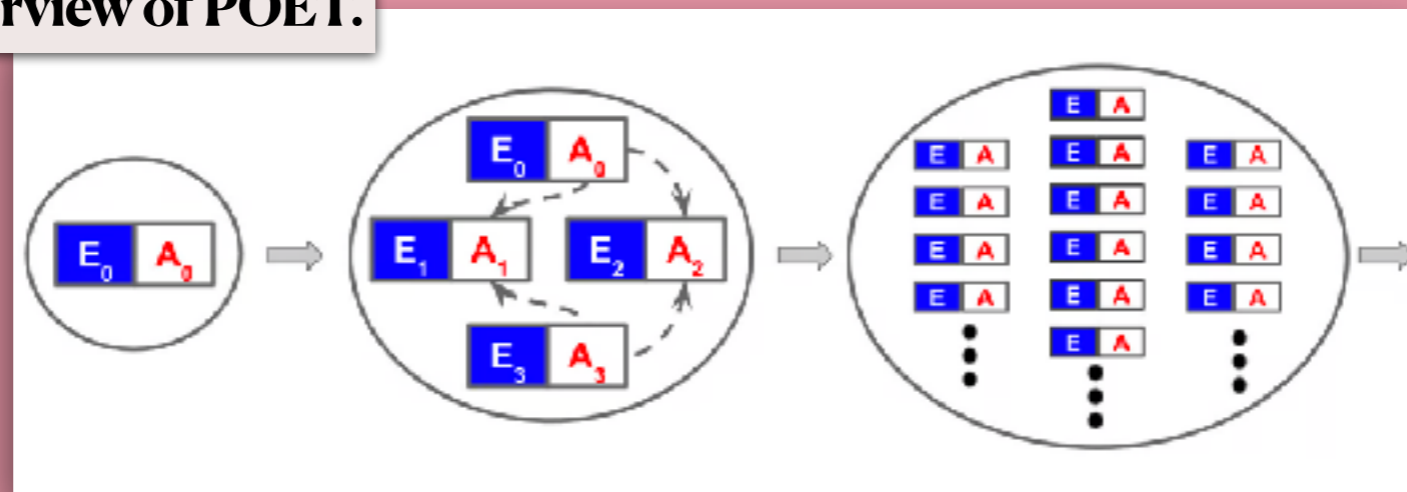
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Randy Beer's case of switching between perspectives on simulated selves: 'god-like', 'in-the-world', 'subjective'

Observers

The slide is titled "Observers" and features two main panels. The left panel contains several black and white icons: a city skyline with several skyscrapers, a car, a bicycle, a dog sitting on a leash, a large tree with many leaves, and three birds in flight. There are also two blue eye icons, one in the top right and one in the middle left of the panel. The right panel contains several abstract shapes made of black and blue pixels, including a large 'E' shape, a 'T' shape, a 'G' shape, a 'B' shape, a 'C' shape, and a 'J' shape. There is also a blue eye icon in the top center of the right panel. In the top right corner, there is a small video inset of a man with glasses and a beard, identified as "Randall Beer".

Randall Beer's talk at the Consciousness Club, March 28, 2023

Operating a “change of variables” between levels of organization

	Object	Experience	Reflection
Physics	\circ Physical object	$x \cdot \circ$ Mental state	$x \cdot x \cdot \circ$ Introspection
Phenomenological psychology	$[o]$ Object as it is intended	$x' \cdot [o]$ Phenomenological experience	$x' \cdot x' \cdot [o]$ Phenomenological reflection
Transcendental phenomenology	$[o]$ Object as it is intended	$[x'] \cdot [o]$ Pure phenomenological experience	$x'' \cdot [x'] \cdot [o]$ Transcendental-phenomenological reflection

Figure 6.1: Experience levels matrix.

This diagram represents the matrix of levels of experience. It is structured to display a level of experience in each row, corresponding to disciplines of study, and an object of study in each column, corresponding to the studied entities: the object of an experience, the experience itself, and the reflection on the experience.

Translating between technological layers

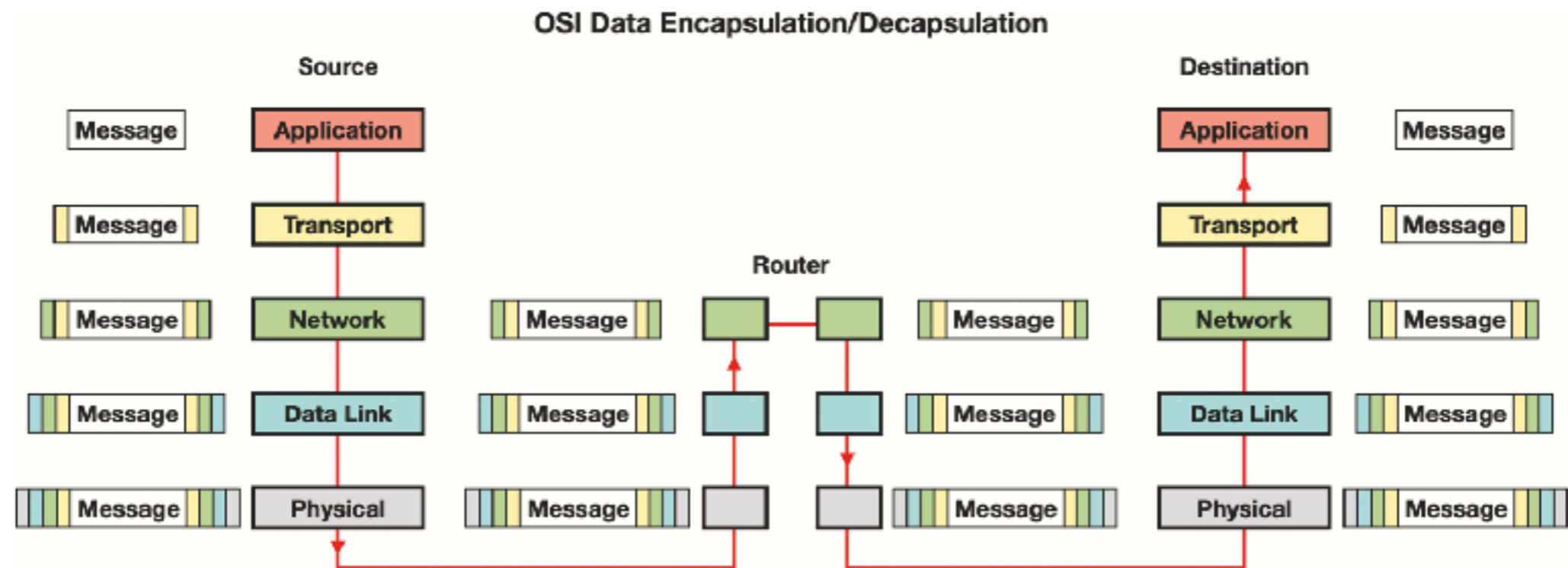


Figure 6.2: OSI Data Encapsulation/Decapsulation.

This diagram shows the Open Systems Interconnection model of the Internet, exemplifying the process of sending a message that will be successively encapsulated and decapsulated. The key concepts of this computational model, as well as several others imported from mathematics, shed light on the importance of bracketing and distinguishing mechanisms between layers.

Chess play as model immersion: getting in, getting out

- When one plays a game of chess – as an example – one becomes the pieces and their dynamics. Immersedly diving in and out of play may be necessary to modeling it in practice.
- Typically, “Getting in” may require learning new principles/emotions, which may be acquired from scratch once immersed in the new paradigm at play.
- Typically, “Getting out”, may involve extracting, translating meaning back to the outer reality.



Chess play as model immersion: getting in, getting out



Summing up

- We propose that playfulness involves a dynamic movement of **“going in” (immersion) and “going out” (bracketing)** of a local virtual world.
- This is reminiscent of Gadamer’s definition of play as a **dynamic to-and-fro movement**, though he emphasized the immersive dimension of play.
- Ricoeur and Buddhism **highlight the “bracketing”** aspect, which is equally (if not more) important for play and playfulness.
- This resonates with the study of system dynamics, including AI/RL, seeking a balance mechanism between **“exploration” and “exploitation”**.
- Bracketing is potentially more challenging, as it requires grounding external values into a **new meaning space**.