



The Glass Bead Game: A Basic Form of Play, Genealogy, and Examples Pt. 1

By Paul Pilkington

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In 1943, Hermann Hesse published his novel *Das Glasperlenspiel* (The Glass Bead Game). The game itself is a central theme of the novel. He gave only a sketch of how it might be played in practice, but made it clear that it is a game of comparisons and analogies across different subject areas, in the tradition of Pythagoras, Lull, Kepler, Kircher and others who searched for the unifying principles of all knowledge. The history of the development of the game in the novel demonstrates a direct analogy with the history of mathematics in the seventeenth century, as shaped by mathematicians with a deep interest in music theory. Paul Pilkington has brought the Glass Bead Game to life in an ongoing series of books. His version of the Glass Bead Game can be played at many levels of complexity. Its moves can be deeply technical, or conversationally playful. A move in a game about music and astronomy might ask: If the solar year in astronomy is like the octave in music, what is the equivalent of a lunar month in music? A more playful game about music and fashion asks: If Alexander McQueen is the Jimi Hendrix of fashion, what is his Purple Haze? Another asks: Who is the Napoleon of football, and what was his Waterloo? A more intimate game enquires: Where is your Ithaca? This first volume presents a basic form of play, genealogy, and examples including a short game concerning music and mathematics, architecture and I Ching, and many other examples including a game move linking a couplet of Arabic poetry, a theme from the Art of Fugue by Bach, and an I Ching Hexagram. There are two other volumes currently available, and a forthcoming volume will collect notable examples of glass bead game moves from literature, the media, and other diverse sources, and will put into play a range of opening gambits intended to inspire further exploration and elaboration of the form by others, especially in more informal contexts. Paul is sharing the ongoing work at his Twitter account @JustKnecht. Playfully using the language of the game itself: in bringing the concept of the dreamer into reality, these volumes do for *Glasperlenspiel* what Gothic architecture did for the light-drenched Enneads of Plotinus, what the Bolshevik revolution did for Capital by Marx, and what the World Wide Web did for Neuromancer by Gibson.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Paul Pilkington is a classically trained musician, with a lifelong interest in the relationship between music and mathematics. Reading the novel Glass Bead Game by Hermann Hesse as a youth, Paul was deeply fascinated by the idea of the game itself. The first games were played in the domains of mathematics and music. Subsequently, the medium was taken up and applied by experts to their own diverse fields of knowledge. Hesse had envisaged the development of the game as being dependent on an in-depth and comprehensive application of the medium to a succession of different subjects. Paul was inspired by the game to pursue a formal education in mathematics, which gave him an in depth understanding of the applied mathematics of acoustics, and the pure arithmetic of ratio and proportion which together are the mathematical foundations of music, which provided the subject matter of the dissertation for his first degree. He followed this with a higher degree which studied logic, grammar, and information theory, and again his dissertation on applying a mathematical model of human hearing to speech recognition was fundamentally concerned with mathematics and music. For more than 25 years, Paul has continued his study of music, mathematics, astronomy, and geometry, in his endeavor to create a playable version of the glass bead game which built on these foundations. After many false starts, he finally discovered the kernel of his version of the game in ancient Norse kennings, as previously used by Ron Hale-Evans in his own version of the Glass Bead Game, Kennexions. Paul created a game of structured comparisons and analogies across different subject areas, in the tradition of Pythagoras, Lull, Kepler, Kircher and others who searched for the unifying principles of all knowledge. The three volumes published to date each contain a game based on comparisons and analogies between subject areas including mathematics, music, astronomy, chemistry, religion, botany, poetry, war, cookery and dance. A forthcoming volume will collect notable examples of glass bead game moves from literature, the media, and other diverse sources, and will put into play a range of opening gambits intended to inspire further exploration and elaboration of the form by others, especially in more informal contexts. Paul is sharing his ongoing work at Twitter account @JustKnecht.

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