

Fiction Façade and the Zero Player Game

Cindy Poremba

In videogames, an attract mode is an animated segment, typically an automated gameplay demo, meant to lure players to the game. An attract mode was (and is) a common feature of games designed for public spaces, such as arcades. *Fiction Façade*, in a sense, presents us with an attract mode of sorts: a piece drawing us in to a work that seems to be playing itself. And like the best attract modes, it has a spectatorial quality that invites passers-by to get swept up in its visual rhythms, emergent patterns, and cheerful blips.

Fiction Façade is a 2011 outdoor installation for UrbanScreen by Urban Visuals' Konstantinos Mavromichalis and Nathan Whitford. Its colourful, geometric animations recall early computer visuals, notably arcade games (including non-digital arcade games like pinball) and first-generation console games. Select visual elements, and the soundscape for the work (accessible by tuning in to a radio channel) are generated through collisions between the projected virtual objects seen in the animation and the physical architecture, such as the windows and wall edges of Surrey's Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre. Simulated physics allows for emergent images, such as an object rolling atop a window, or another bouncing off a wall edge. A camera detects people passing in front of the installation, and their position also triggers various generative aspects of the projected content; so, for example, if a passer-by was to walk across the front of the work, the origin of an effect could change and follow them along the path. This creates variation in the animated sequences as the work responds to its environment, reacting not only the building itself, but an entire situated context that includes humans: one playful system.

"It is reminiscent of early video games, with a kind of retro-futurism,"¹ say artists Mavromichalis and Whitford. On one level, this is self-apparent: the work's abstract shooting geometries, flashes, and physics collisions present a generalized reference to games like *Pong* [1972], or *Tempest* [1981]. Mavromichalis and Whitford note the soundscape is informed by older console-based 8-bit video games.² But both the retro and the futurism here are significant: *Fiction Façade* both calls back to a generalized digital past, and anticipates a non-human future.

The aesthetic of the early video game, or retrogame, is often contextualized within the framework of nostalgia; in triggering memories for a generation who had grown up playing games like *Pac Man* (1980) and *Space Invaders* (1978). But this broad framing may obscure reasons why it proves popular as a public art aesthetic. Theorist Brett Camper sees retro, in the context of game aesthetics, as a particular type of artistic reference, noting it "carries with it a source of discontinuous influence, resemblance coupled with temporal distance."³ Stacey Menzel Baker and Patricia F. Kennedy describe this as "simulated nostalgia," specifically, a "bittersweet yearning for a past indirectly experienced,"⁴ as opposed to one anchored to direct experience. The value of this reference is not necessarily in accurately recreating these early game forms in the present day, or even triggering specific memories for game players (although it can still do this, in honesty, very few people have fond memories of playing *Pong*). Instead, as



Urban Visuals, *Fiction Façade*, 2011. Photography by Brian Giebelhaus.

Christian McCrea observes, why and how elements are mobilized can reflect a range of intentions.⁵ In the case of *Fiction Façade*, the aesthetic connects with a generalized early computing nostalgia not isolated within game culture. Early game visuals here present an iconicity of the wonder and optimism of the early home computer age, untarnished by complexity and toxicity, for players and non-players alike, for viewers and for gamers. This is one of the qualities that makes this aesthetic particularly accessible, and compelling, in public pieces. *Fiction Façade* evokes this aesthetic with flashes, colours, and geometric shapes evoking visuals from early arcade and console games, presenting a generalized, and more inclusive, iconicity. This allows it to speak both to a spectator for whom a specific bar of 8-bit generated music evokes early Saturday console memories, but also still be parsable in recalling a moment of great techno-optimism of an earlier computer age: in some ways, a time when we were all gamers.

But beyond nostalgia, there are other aspects of *Fiction Façade* that resonate today with game spectatorships—in both visualist works and recontextualizations, and increasingly gameplay performance. We can watch performances of dance or theatre without judgement; the pleasures found in the spectatorship of playfulness are less often discussed. But games have always been both played and watched—sports being the most obvious example. Visualist works are a mainstay of game art, from the psychedelic hyperviolence of Brody Condon's *Adam Killer* (1999-2001), to the meditative simplicity of Cory Arcangel's *Clouds* (2002). Games have substituted for VJ work at club venues, and online digital game viewership platforms, the most popular being Twitch, have massive spectator audiences. The play of others, even when the other is not present, can be compelling, cathartic, tense, and beautiful. Games with emergent movement patterns, like pinball and *Pong*, *Galaga* (1981), or *Centipede* (1981), are mesmerizing to watch: the aesthetic of the play itself is rhythmic, steady, fluid. Arcade-style works are exemplars of single-player spectatorial experiences; visually interesting even without specialized gameplay knowledge, and accessible without demanding sustained, focused viewership.⁶ In embodying these design qualities, the generative animations of *Fiction Façade* capture the spectatorial presence of these works.

Fiction Façade also has company in other low-interaction games, idle games, and zero-player games (for example David O'Reilly's *Mountain* (2014), or Ed Key and David Kanaga's *Proteus* (2013)). Its close kin are what game theorists Staffan Björk and Jesper Juul would define as *setup only games*, including cellular automata like John Conway's *Game of Life* (1970). Like *Game of Life*, or even pinball, *Fiction Façade*'s pleasures lie in watching the unfolding, emergent work, with player agency constrained largely to the setup of conditions that are then played out. We are minor players in this unfolding, part of a playful system that includes the expanded architecture of a building. As Björk and Juul note, "players can use (setup only games) to challenge themselves to design certain patterns, but at the same time this contradicts the notion that a game is something that someone plays." People encountering *Fiction Façade* may similarly choose to "play" the work, by using their presence to generate particular patterns in response; or, they may simply take pleasure in the spectatorship of play. Where the zero-player game might not match the spectatorial appeal of some competitive multiplayer games, what they may give is more conducive to contemplation and a more subtle aesthetic experience of rhythms and recognitions, of submission to an almost ambient playful experience.

Fiction Façade is not explicitly positioned as a game; it is a responsive installation drawing upon videogame aesthetics. However, I think it is not unreasonable to view it through the lens of the zero-player spectatorial game, and this reading gives us insight into its role as both a retro and futurist work. We are increasingly cognisant of the space we share with non-humans: whether that be artificial intelligence, or our natural environment. Like watching an attract mode, or bots argue over Twitter, *Fiction Façade* is an experience of watching non-human play. As an audience we can be intentionally or unintentionally absorbed into the system—but as a generative element in a game we are not really playing. It offers for us a revisionist past ambivalent, but not hostile, to us. As we increasingly appreciate a world where our agency is shared with non-humans, *Fiction Façade* shows us how to find pleasure in these moments.

Notes

- 1 Surrey Art Gallery. "Projected outdoor artwork turns recreation centre into 100 foot wide arcade game: *Fiction Façade*." Surrey Art Gallery Press Release, September 22, 2011.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Brett Camper, "Fake Bit: Imitation and Limitation," in *Proceedings of the 2009 Digital Arts and Culture Conference* (UC Irvine, 12-15 Dec 2009). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3s67474h>.
- 4 S.M Baker and P.F. Kennedy, "Death by Nostalgia: A Diagnosis of Context Specific Cases." *Advances in Consumer Research*, 21 (1994): 380-387.
- 5 Christian McCrea, "Then, suddenly, I was moved: Nostalgia and the media history of games," in *Proceedings of the 7th International Digital Arts and Cultures Conference: The Future of Digital Media Culture* (Perth, Australia, 15–18 Sep 2007).
- 6 George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield, K. Robert Gutschera, and Eric Zimmerman, *Characteristics of Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012): 220-221.
- 7 Staffan Björk and Jesper Juul, "Zero-Player Games. Or: What We Talk about When We Talk about Players" (presented at the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Madrid, 2012). <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/zeroplayergames/>
- 8 Ibid.