

Let's Play Façade

“Virtual reality” as a concept is fascinating at a brief mental glance. The phrase calls to mind an idea of a futuristic, colorful world where cars and people can fly, houses can talk, and disabling limitations of everyday life don't exist. That vision is as imaginative as it is inaccurate. That is not virtual reality; it's fantasy. However, that confusion is excusable, because the unfortunate reality of reality is that it's boring. Reality is everything we take for granted. A virtual reality is simply a synthesized version of what one already knows. At its root, all it can be is an attempt at mimicry. It can never be as good, let alone better, than the actual. A virtual reality is just reality, except coded, incomplete, flawed and ultimately inconsequential.

In 2005, as if to confirm this, the video game Façade was released. At the time it received remarkable reception. Façade was meant to introduce completely different strand of gameplay. Instead of strategic or puzzle-based contest, it was a relationship adventure. The draw of the game was not based on graphics or franchise; it was based solely on communication. Façade was an interactive work of fiction, and the player was supposed to, as with any work of fiction, get lost to the point of forgetting it was fake. To an extent, it was extremely successful. The New York Times even claimed that “this is the future of video games.”

It's been seven years, and the present still hasn't caught up to promises of the past, but the game still has an impact. Like most games with longevity, its premise was simple enough to stay relevant over time. Within the falsehood of Façade, you are a guest at two friends' apartment under the assumption that you're there get back in touch with them after a long friendship hiatus. These two friends, Trip and Grace, are having relationship issues, and it's your job, as a

friend (and functionally as a player hoping to score nonexistent points) to help them. Winning the game is decided as saying whatever words it takes to inspire the two of them to talk out their problems to their (and your) satisfaction. This conversation, as determined by the programmers, is success; this ultimate conversation was the original purpose of the game.

However, as with any freely available content (compositions with lapsed copyright, freeware programming, etc), it can be used in ways far different from its original intention. *Façade* has since become free to download, and the draw of the game is no longer to save Grace and Trip from separation. Its draw is now an opportunity for the player to say outrageous or ridiculous things to Grace and Trip in the hopes of receiving rhetorically ironic or humorous responses. The mission of the game has been taken on a completely different course, and this new course, in full rhetorical irony, has become a meme

This kind of shift is not uncommon, and it often happens without notice. Different marketable or artistic renditions of the Mona Lisa are created fairly commonly. The picture's original form is changed, and its purposes are changed with it. However, the picture still needs to be recognizably the Mona Lisa for the rendition itself to mean anything. The *Façade* meme finds meaning the same way. The conversations with Grace and Trip are bizarre, comedic, and purposefully inauthentic. However, they take the form of real conversation and take the form of an actual attempt at genuine gameplay. The construct remains recognizable regardless of the fact that the content is corrupted. It is the corruption of conversation that makes the meme.

The actual practice of making a *Façade* meme is as complicated as the concept. The creation is carried out in a much more difficult way than posting "cool story, bro" on Twitter. One has to take the time to download the game, procure the necessary software to capture your

game in video, and then take the time to upload their creation onto a public website. Unlike twitter, consumption of the meme can take up to a half hour. Also, unlike Twitter, the creation of this meme is entirely virtual. However, like Twitter, there is a conversational character limit. At the same time, unlike Twitter, the interactions aren't between two people. On the other hand, like Twitter, you can pretend to be someone else. But more importantly, unlike Twitter, you won't get a DMCA for it. It has as many common markings of a meme it does fiction, and it's in that unlikely overlap that the Facade meme splices.

This ambivalence of purpose takes the meme creator down two separate, but parallel paths. The first falls under the category of roleplay. On the internet, a person can assume whatever identity they can get away with. This isn't necessarily done for nefarious or impurely personal purposes, and in many cases it can simply come down to a chance for one to purge the dissonance between who they are and who they want to be. It's an opportunity for someone to act out a storyline that real-life can't or won't let. The large userbases of sites like www.fanfiction.net or the active roleplaying sections on dedicated message boards for different fandoms bear out the commonality of this mentality. It also shows that these things are often only carried out in places where the roleplayer feels safe to pretend.

Facade gives players that safety. They can play a caring friend or autodidactic psychologist or self-abusive ex-lover without any worry of repercussion, and they can do it as quickly as it takes for the mood to strike and the game to load. In fact, there's no way to avoid it. The second Grace says "it's been so long since we've seen each other" the player is forced to act as someone they're not, even if they attempt to go the route of my remix. Witting or not, one who plays Façade will roleplay regardless of how authentic to their own personality they attempt

to be. The creators of the memes, on some level, seem to realize this. Their conversational contributions often take on forms of different fantastical characterizations such as Genghis Khan or a zombie horse named RayJay the Immaterial. Part of the enjoyment of the meme is the ridiculous characterizations played out at Grace and Trip's respective expense.

It's that expense, however, that takes a player to the second path which, generally, is of greater relation to the draw of the meme. This path is that of a troll. Wikipedia (the self-idealized academic construct of the internet, and likely the academic source most intimately familiar with the concept) defines a troll as "someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response" In simpler terms, a troll is someone who acts like a jerk on the internet.

Acting like a jerk on the internet is different from acting like a jerk in real life, and oftentimes the people who act this way in these different circumstances are entirely different groups of people. The real-life jerkish are those who have little interest in the opinions and reactions of others. They act the way they do for the pure, authentic sake of it. Those who partake in trolling need the response but, rather than keying people's actual cars or interrupting people's actual conversations in actual coffee shops with nonsequiter 4chan interjections, have the benefit of doing it fairly anonymously. The "Say that to my face fucker and not online and see what happens" meme is rarely ever, if ever, brought to its proposed conclusion. The assumed reaction would be a news story worth covering under the headline "The Internet: How it Will Get Your Children Assaulted." Instead, in regards to trolling, what's mostly seen in media coverage are personal-interest stories about victims who are forced to live with internet bullying and the

horrible things left on their Facebook pages by people they've never even met.

In spite of these consequences, many people (author included) still feel a compulsion to that anonymous authority. However, many of these people (author included) don't feel like showing up backlit and defenseless on Fox News act the dartboard for Nancy Grace's dull moral platitudes. There's a definite social psychological interest in asking "how will this statement make people react?" However, the reactions to that statement are irrevocably real and are not as definitively guarded or guided by curiosity as the inciting statement may be. They are real words said to real people that have real consequences. Real life is not a game, so a game was found. The Façade meme gives people the chance to carry out any sort of perverse trolling desire in a safe, sandbox environment. Instead of simply hiding in an anonymous username, you're hiding in a completely different world. The victims are fake, the story ends, and the only person personally affected by the outlandish fiction is the writer. Those who consume the meme are observers, not actors. Everyone is safe, because everyone is real.

Unlike with regular roleplaying, if done in real life, the common reaction to the type of interaction carried out within Façade memes would not just be met with confusion by passersby; they would be met with derision. It's commonly accepted decorum that one isn't supposed to mock a friend's decorating job with a wine bottle in hand before casually kissing her and calling her husband a wanker. It's so commonly accepted that there may never have been any call before this moment for that sentence to exist. However, within Façade memes, these things can and do happen. These things exist so far outside of the usual that they can turn the unavoidably boring virtual reality into the fantasy that people want it to be. That fantasy is then consumed in the world of reality. If done well enough, the fantasy then consumes its consumer to the point

where they need to record a fantasy of their own. The meme lives on.