Off The Grid:

Invader and Melbourne Street
Art in the early 2000s

September 2022 to February 2023

City Gallery Melbourne Town Hall

melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery



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Curator

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Thanks

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Respect to the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung tribes of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the lands on which this exhibition takes place. Their sovereignty over these lands has never been ceded.

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Twenty years ago, the anonymous French street artist known as Invader visited Melbourne and secretly installed twenty-five tile mosaics across the city.

Unlike most street art of the period,

many of invader's artworks are still intact. Off The Grid explores the legacy of his visit and the recurring grid motif in Melbourne street art, referencing both the city's colonial streetscape and the pixelated screens of digital culture.





Waves of Zeroes.

Lachlan MacDowall

In June 2002, the anonymous French street artist known as Invader visited Melbourne and secretly installed 25 tile mosaics across the city. What was the meaning of this visit and these artworks? On the surface, Invader's work references the early video game Space Invaders (1978), and most commentary on his artworks reinforces this connection.

This exhibition, however, looks more broadly at the historical connections that come together in his work and specifically in the works he installed in Melbourne in 2002, one of which appears in the exhibition.

In 2010, as the Melbourne Arts Centre was undergoing a major renovation, a section of bluestone wall to which an Invader work was attached was scheduled for demolition. At the last minute the artwork was saved, cut from the wall by building workers. Cracked but intact, it entered the City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection.

Now, 20 years after it was first installed in Melbourne, it is being reconsidered in a wider historical frame.

Beyond the iconography of *Space Invaders*, how else can we think about Invader's work? Perhaps as part of the long and rich history of Melbourne's street art and the recurring motif of the grid in local street art. Also, in relation to the history of *Space Invaders*, once the world's most popular video game, and its creator Tomohiro Nishikado. To fully understand the work of Invader we must also consider the longer history of both computing and aerial warfare, which stretches back to the 19th century, along with the history of Melbourne itself, its gridded streets mirroring the grids of Invader's work and Nishikado's games.



One night in 1942, while serving in the Australian Army in Darwin, my grandfather narrowly avoided injury during an attack by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service, the aerial arm of the Imperial Japanese Navy. During a night air raid, he left the shelter of a bunker to extinguish a light, only for a bullet from a Japanese plane to pass through the heel of his army boot. After the war, the boot with the hole remained in the garage of his family home.

In the sky above him on the night of the Darwin raid were waves of Japanese Zeroes, fighter planes built by the Mitsubishi Aircraft Company. The Zero was named after the last digit of the imperial year 2600, when it first entered service (1940), based on the imperial calendar, which commenced on the founding of Japan by Emperor Jimmu in 660 BCE. Photographs of the period show massive formations of carefully spaced aircraft, waves of Zeroes in the sky.

By the time my grandfather arrived in Darwin, the first bombings of Darwin by the Japanese Air Force had already taken place, with waves of Japanese Zero fighter planes flying off the same aircraft carriers that had attacked Pearl Harbor. The attacks led to preparations for the defence of Australia and the expectation of future air raids on other cities. As early as April 1941, the Australian Government was urging its citizens to prepare for attacks, with public banners reading: 'The sirens have sounded! The drone from the planes is coming nearer! Seek shelter!' The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the fall of Singapore and the bombing of Darwin in February 1942 further raised the alert, with preparations made across Australia for evacuations to bomb shelters. A map from 1942 shows the location of possible bomb shelters in the centre of Melbourne.



Within a year of my grandfather's narrow escape from the Japanese warplanes, and more than a year before war's end, Japanese designer Tomohiro Nishikado was born in Kishiwada City on the edge of Osaka Bay, near the present-day international airport. As a young man, Nishikado was fascinated with science and electronics. In high school he built radios and amplifiers, and after graduating with an engineering degree, he planned to work for the Sony Corporation. But through a series of coincidences, he ended up joining a division of Taito, a company then well known for electro-mechanical games in cabinets.

The development of transistors and integrated circuits transformed previously mechanical machines into the first electronic games. Though he would work on video game development for the next 70 years, Nishikado would become famous for the development of one of his first games, *Space Invaders*. He spent months disassembling the circuits of one of the early video games, *Pong*, to see how it worked. Using his engineering skills, he worked on all aspects of the *Space Invaders* game design, from programming and sound to visual design.

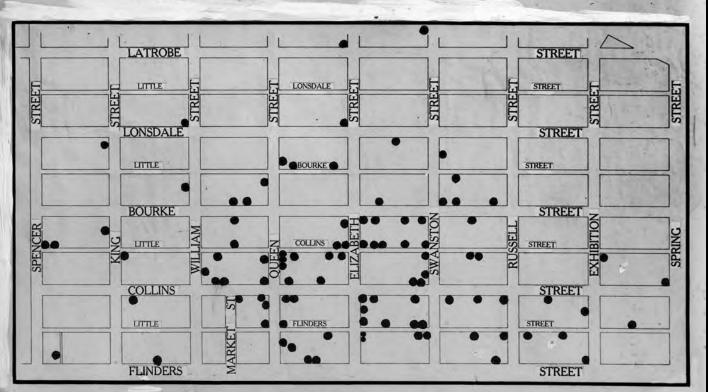
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Invader Tile mosaic (MLB_19) Princes Bridge, Melbourne 2002

4×44 freg. 10 3.42

CITY OF MELBOURNE

PLAN SHOWING LOCATION OF BUILDINGS TENTATIVELY SELECTED STIBLIC AIR RAID SHELTERS



Opposite

Plan showing location of buildings tentatively selected for public air raid shelters, c.1942

Gelatin silver photograph State Library of Victoria

Below

Japanese pilots and flight deck crews wait for the order to launch a squadron of A6M2 Zero fighter aircraft which are idling on the deck of the aircraft carrier Akagi, in preparation for the attack on Pearl Harbour.
7 Dec 1941

Black and white photograph

Overleaf

Invader
Tile mosaic (MLB_02),
removed from the
Melbourne Arts Centre
retaining wall during
demolition works in 2010.
City of Melbourne
Art and Heritage collection







Above

Screenshot of the original Space Invaders video game 1978 On its release in Japan and North America in 1978, *Space Invaders* was a huge hit, becoming not only one of the most well-known video games but also one of the most successful and profitable cultural products of all time. Its release began the golden age of arcade video games, with machines spilling out of dedicated arcades (more than 24,000 full arcades in North America in 1982) to supermarkets and restaurants and on early home computers.² *Space Invaders* premiered elements that were to become integral to the logic of future games: it was the first 'shoot 'em up' game and the first in which players had a number of 'lives' or could achieve a 'high score'. It was also the first video game with a continuous soundtrack.

In postwar Japan there were prohibitions against representing violence and human combat in video games. Nevertheless, games of this period included many references to aerial warfare, such as the very early *Sky Fighter* game (1971), a cumbersome electro-mechanical game which involved mirrors and model planes. Later, a game would be named after the year of the most intense aerial combat of World War II. Released in 1984, the scrolling shooter video game 1942 simulates an air battle over the Pacific. Japanese developers had the US market in mind, with the player's goal being to reach Tokyo and attack the Japanese air fleet.

Nishikado lists a series of influences on the design of *Space Invaders*, including other video games and movies but principally the 1953 film adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds*, which he had seen as a young child. Wells' novel tells the story of a Martian invasion of the English countryside, with giant tentacled machines descending from space and attempting to enslave the human race. The novel conjures the terror of an aerial invasion, with the Martians living on a depleted planet and looking to the Earth with 'envious eyes'.

Sometimes grouped with other 'invasion literature' of the late 19th century that imagined attacks on Britain by European powers as an argument for renewed militarisation, *The War of the Worlds* is more accurately described as a critique of British colonialism. In later years, Wells commented that he

had in mind the colonial brutality of white settlement in Tasmania when he drafted the story of an encounter between the Martian and human races:

'Suppose some beings from another planet were to drop out of the sky suddenly,' said he, 'and begin laying about them here!' Perhaps we had been talking of the discovery of Tasmania by the Europeans – a very frightful disaster for the native Tasmanians! I forget. But that was the point of departure.³

The tentacled Martians and their spacecraft from the 1953 film adaptation inspired Nishikado's pixelated design of the large Invader in the *Space Invaders* game, known as the Octopus. Accordingly, the other game characters are based on sea life: a small Invader (the Squid) and a medium Invader (the Crab), which each cycle through a simple animated sequence. In his tile works, the artist Invader used all of these designs and also his own versions. The Invader work held in the City of Melbourne collection is a Crab, with its armed raised.

Due to Taito's prohibition on representing violence against humans and the constraints of the rudimentary circuitry, which was unable to simulate complex motions, Nishikado opted for the biomorphic creatures that hover in rows. In the game, their simple motion of waves adds a menacing inevitability to their descent towards the player's base. Despite the simple graphics, to play Space Invaders is to experience the stress and anxiety of the inexorable descent of an alien aerial invasion.

Accounts of Nishikado's design of *Space Invaders* usually focus on the influence of Wells, the lure of space travel and the space opera of *Star Wars*, released a year before the game. But for a child born during World War II, a suffocating attack from above by waves of aircraft also recalls the horrors of the war. As a small child, Nishikado himself would have lived through American air raids on Japan, including a low-level night raid on his home city of Osaka by B-29 bombers on 13 March 1945. The raid centred on the areas near the historic Osaka Castle, not far from Nishikado's prefecture, and lasted for three and half hours, just a few weeks from his first birthday.



The cultural influence of Nishikado's *Space Invaders* was profound, and not just on the golden age of video games and the early years of home computers. For many, the game became a talisman of a particular period, a teenage era. It was not just the literal content that was engaging but also the context in which early video games were played. In both arcades and on home computers, *Space Invaders* encouraged social gameplay. For those who remember this era, early video games offered the pleasures of repetition and competition, and an escape from provincial lives or parental authority. For many, early video games also offered a gateway to a global digital culture. Certainly, for French artist Invader, travel has been central to his art practice, having now installed his mosaics in more than 80 cities around the world.

While many artists have taken up its iconography, the graphics of *Space Invaders* have become synonymous with Invader. From the mid-1990s, he was experimenting with various types of public installations on the streets. Video footage from the 1990s shows Invader installing images of *Space Invader* creatures around Paris, while his collaborator, Zevs, experiments with a new digital video camera. Indeed, like the advent of integrated circuits and consumer electronics in the early 1970s, the mid-1990s was an era of technical innovation and widespread creativity. Just as Nishikado straddled the transition from mechanical to electronic games, the 1990s saw the beginning of the public internet and a transition from analogue to digital consumer technology.



By the early 2000s, Melbourne already had a lively street-art scene, but Invader's visit, along with that of Banksy the following year, signalled an increasing prominence for street art and its international networks. In Melbourne, street art has its roots in the collision of graffiti culture, political activism and art school swagger. By the 2000s, the term 'street art' had become a popular means to gather together a range of different practices and artists.

Reviewing Melbourne's street art from this period, it is clear that Invader was not the only artist making work inspired by digital culture and the aesthetics of the grid. The exhibition displays photographs of works by five Melbourne-based artists, their gridded artworks also responding to the graphics and ethos of digital technology. Some of the artists were working in the early 2000s, and others continued this tradition into the next decade.

Popularly known as 'Cratemen', the milk-crate sculptures produced by an anonymous collective in inner Melbourne are the most direct example of these gridded works. Constructed from coloured milk crates and cable ties, these figures appeared along train lines and on rooftops in Melbourne and generated much public attention; they also appeared briefly in an introductory sequence to Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. The Cratemen are exemplars of the high-concept, low-technology artwork. Instantly recognisable and constructed from everyday materials, the simple design belies the complexity of engineering and installation, including the effort required to gather materials and access high locations.

Like Invader's tile works, the Cratemen exist in a highly pixelated, low-resolution world, yet these crude shapes still manage to generate human responses and emotions. Also like Invader's works, the Cratemen display the manner of their design, in fact providing a map or plan for their construction, almost inviting imitation or replication. Both Invader's works and the Cratemen have been copied by fans.

In 2003, two graffiti writers entered an empty office building scheduled for demolition. At this time, Melbourne endured seemingly endless reconstruction, and empty city buildings were common terrain for urban explorers, squatters and graffiti writers looking to place tags on the city skyline. However, the scale and precision of the tagging in this building transcended the usual vandalism. Demonstrating restraint and careful planning, the writers produced single white tags in each window of the 10-storey building, 18 windows in each. The tags were produced in a chequerboard design and painted in reverse, to address the outside viewer.

Previous Spread

Crateman Yarraville, Melbourne 2008 Photograph: Lachlan MacDowall

Top and bottom

Tagged building by Renks and Carl Bourke Street, Melbourne 2005 Photograph:

Lachlan MacDowall Opposite and overleaf

GoonHugs stickers Melbourne 2016 Photograph: Lachlan MacDowall











Attributed to Renks and Carl, and best considered a single artwork, the piece had many aesthetic resonances. It was restrained in its approach – single tags in single colours – but also uncompromising, striving for total coverage of the object. It demonstrated the addictive repetition of tagging, but with improvised flourishes in each window. In the visual language of *Space Invaders*, the sky filled with waves of descending tags. Long since demolished and replaced with a larger generic office tower, this artwork constructed entirely of tags was one of the key works of the period.

Like Renks and Carl's work, Goon Hug's sticker-covered tram stops sought totality and a similar visual impact, though at a different scale. The written description of the artwork – 'a glass tram stop covered in small coloured stickers' – does not do justice to the full effect of a mundane and usually transparent piece of corporate street furniture plastered in pink abstract squares, the light pouring through it. The energy of the piece came not only from its colour but also from the casual misalignment of the stickers, a counterpoint to Invader's precise tile grid. As with Renks and Carl's building, the tram shelters were not canvases but containers – the tags responding to the grid and succeeding in filling it up.

Sydney artist Andy Uprock works with disposable plastic cups, placing them in chain-link fences to produce complex patterns. The works are completed with a loose burst of spray-paint in various colours. When backlit, the works glow like neon. In 2008, Andy installed a series of works in Melbourne's Tattersalls Lane. The artworks took a thoughtless urban gesture – shoving a crumpled cup into a gap in the fence – into a visual system, and the chain-link fence became another expandable, binary, low-res screen for decoration.

Finally, the artist Sunfigo continues the tradition of gridded works up to the present day, filling Melbourne's laneways and freeways with stencils, paste-ups and fence weavings. Sunfigo upgrades the chain-link fence to a higher resolution, allowing him to produce more complex graphics, including many that reflect on digital technology and offer critiques of the corporate

technology of the FAANGS - Facebook (now Meta), Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google (now Alphabet).

Along with Invader's tile mosaics, these five artworks responded to the grid and the rise of digital technology, to the possibilities of the 2000s – the period between the introduction of the public internet in the mid-1990s and the era of closed-off apps and digital corporations in the 2010s. Many creators used the grid because of its prevalence in urban streetscapes, and for those without formal training, grids allow the easy transposition of designs.

Alongside the visual possibilities of the grid, these artworks celebrated not only the look but also the ethos of this period of digital experimentation. By combining grids with everyday materials – milk crates, twine, plastic cups and stickers – in public space, the works embodied an 'open-source' ethic, building on others' designs and showing, rather than hiding, how they were made. Like open-source software and the open nature of the early internet, these artworks displayed their source code, inviting the viewer to copy and remake them.

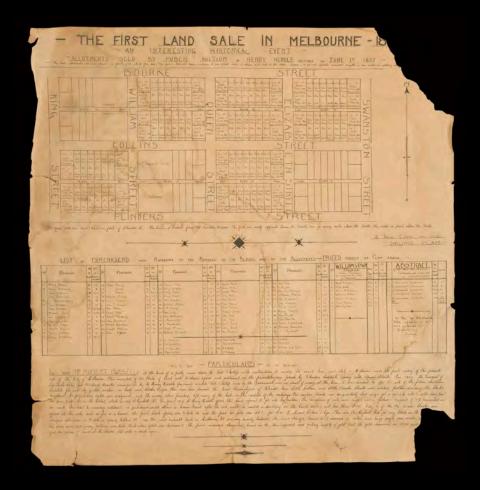


We can see how many street artworks responded to the gridded surfaces of the city and the regular and repetitive urban grammar of windows and fences. But what does it mean to install gridded artworks in Melbourne's gridded streets? The artworks reflect an interest in digital culture – pixels, matrices and codes – but inserted into the streets of the Melbourne grid they also reflect upon our colonial legacy, a fantasy of unlimited space, land ownership and rational control.

From the colonial violence of Tasmania, which would so appal H.G. Wells, the arrival of men and sheep from Van Diemen's Land onto the lands of the Kulin Nation was a 'private and highly speculative investment. No one was in any doubt that it was also a trespass.' Melbourne was, in James Boyce's account, 'the only major Australian city established without government

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Andy Uprock at Section 8 bar in Tattersalls Lane, Melbourne 2008 Photograph: Lachlan MacDowall



sanction'.⁴ The eventual surveying of Melbourne's streets guaranteed the boundaries of future property sales and provided government approval to the early squatters.

The Hoddle grid was pegged out in 1837 by then Assistant Surveyor-General Robert Hoddle, after discussions with his superior, the Governor of New South Wales Richard Bourke. Hoddle laid out the grid, with the main streets three chains wide in imperial measurement. Bourke insisted on secondary laneways for access, but in the later property boom of the gold rush years, these minor east-west streets become frontages, necessitating further informal, unplanned incursions into the grid. This eventually produced hundreds of small lanes, which became a breeding ground for street art and the sites of many of Invader's tile works.

Today, Melbourne's grid is often mentioned with civic pride; it provides wide boulevards and easily navigable streets, in keeping with a modern metropolis. But the Hoddle grid is also enmeshed in the logic of the colonial era, an abstract imposition on stolen land. This gives the grid a more menacing character, an imposition of a new type of imagined space that is stable, regular, binary and infinite. With the technology of the grid, a single surveyor's peg banged into the swampy earth can imply a total system of measurement and ownership that can traverse the whole country. To live within a grid is to live in the spaces of rational action:

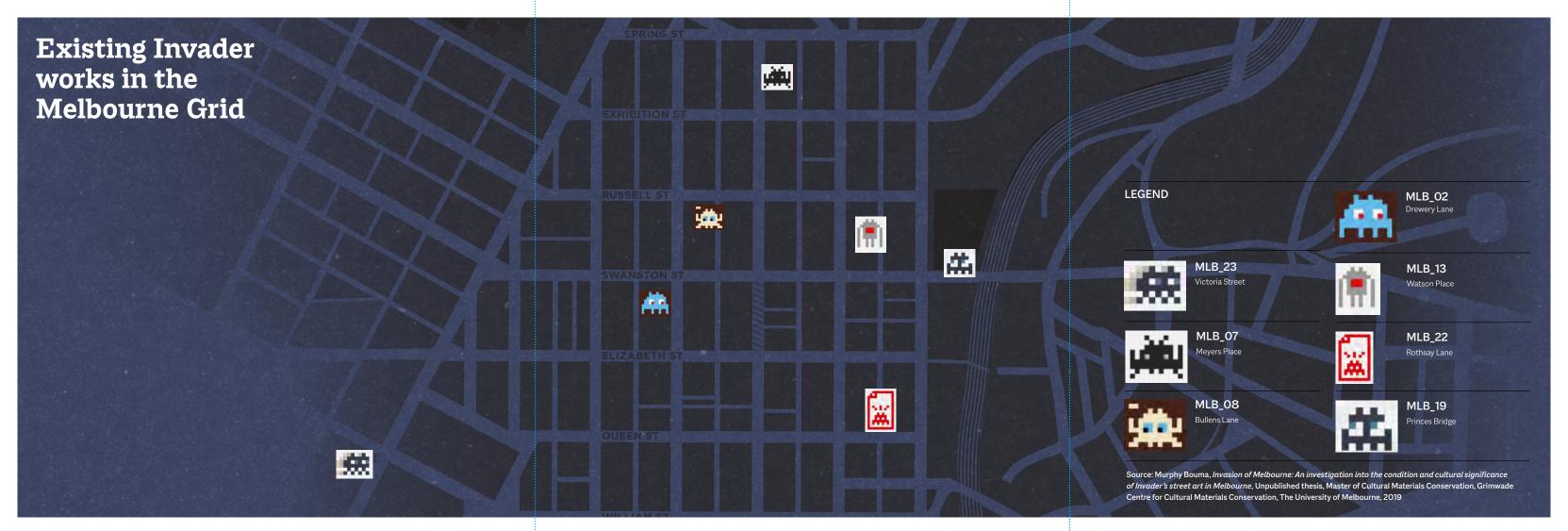
The man of reason, wrote Le Corbusier, the supreme architect of rectilinearity in modern urban design, 'walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going, he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and goes straight to it.'5

Although Invader's artworks are explicitly motivated by nostalgia for the pixelated graphics of early video games, by placing the tiled artworks in a gridded city they activate a broader historical insight: that Melbourne's techno-culture begins not in the 1970s but in the 1830s, with colonisation. What's more, the imagining of a gridded city is bound up with the binary

Opposite

The First Land Sale in Melbourne, 1837 Copy of original plan produced by J. Westly, 1920

ink on paper City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection





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Sunfigo Melbourne 2018 Photograph: Lachlan MacDowall

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Portrait of Charles Babbage Circa 1860. Hulton Archive /Getty Images, used with permission

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Robert Hoddle, Melbourne surveyor, sitting and holding a telescope. Hyman's Portrait Rooms, photographer, circa 1865. Photograph, albumen carte de visite, with hand-colouring State Library of Victoria

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Troy innocent
Cloud
2005
Digital Type-C print
City of Melbourne
Art and Heritage collection

demarcation of property (owned/unowned, sold/unsold) and the projection of a whole way of life - the invasion *of* space, not *from* space.

The year 1837, the year of Hoddle's surveying of Melbourne, was also the year of a breakthrough in digital technology, the design of the first computer by Hoddle's contemporary Charles Babbage, assisted by Ada Lovelace. As was the case for Tomohiro Nishikado's experiments with early integrated circuits in the late 1970s and street artists' fascination with the possibilities of digital culture in the mid-1990s, the 1830s were a fertile time for computing.

Aware of Frenchman Joseph Marie Jaquard's experiments in programming weaving looms, and well-schooled in mathematics, Babbage and Lovelace developed a series of designs for computing machines. In 1837, their simple mechanical adding machine, the Difference Engine, was superseded by a new design, the Analytical Engine, the first general-purpose computer. Though this design was never built, the fundamentals of computing established by Babbage would become the building blocks that Nishikado would unpack from the first *Pong* video game. Using punch cards, the Analytical Engine could undertake a series of programmed operations functionally equivalent to the conditional branching, looping, and parallel processing operations of early electronic computers.'6

Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron, was taught mathematics from an early age, as an antidote to slipping into the madness that consumed her father. But her mathematical training gave way to a different kind of conceptual delirium. It is Ada Lovelace's 'Notes on the Analytical Engine' that are the basis of her position as a founder of modern computing, perhaps more than Babbage, for she understood the implications of the engine, not just for the management of numbers but for all spheres of life.

The lives of Charles Babbage and Robert Hoddle have many parallels. Both were born in London, within a few years and a few miles of each other. The exhibition compares a studio portrait of Hoddle from 1860 with one of Babbage from a few years later; they appear to be wearing nearly identical outfits. This close resemblance of Hoddle and Babbage and the historical coincidence of the founding of Melbourne and of computing illustrate the broader historical confluence of colonial logic and digital technology that comes together in the grid.

Writing in 2004 in *Swindle*, the magazine he founded, artist Shepard Fairey, now himself one of the most well-known street artists, hailed the early work of Invader, who was then still coming to international prominence:

Space Invader is one of the most focussed and thoughtful artists I've ever met. A perfectionist, Invader always puts forth the extra effort to make sure his work makes the maximum impact and endures. His work is subversive, but it isn't anti-social vandalism. He considers his work a 'gift' to the city.⁷

Fairey also predicted:

'One day, cities will come to appreciate this gift, as many of their inhabitants already have, and will pay to preserve his additions to their landscapes as art landmarks.'8

Shepard Fairey's prediction has come true, perhaps to a greater extent than he imagined. Some 20 years since Invader's visit to Melbourne, street art is now, for better or worse, an international art movement, with Invader one its most celebrated practitioners. Invader's gifts to the city continue to quietly pulse with life. By placing his art in Melbourne, of all places, Invader activates a longer history that draws together Melbourne's colonial streetscapes and the pixelated screens of digital culture – a reminder, via art and games, of the fused histories of technological experimentation, aerial warfare and frontier violence, these waves of zeroes and ones.

- 'Air Raid Protection Services (ARP)', Darebin Heritage, heritage.darebinlibraries.vic. gov.au/article/57.
- 2 Steven L. Kent, The Ultimate History of Video Games. From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond: The story Behind the Craze that Touched Our Lives and Changed the World, Prima, 2001, p. 152.
- 3 Philip Ball, 'What The War of the Worlds Means Now: Why the Victorian Anxieties that Underlie H.G. Wells's Masterpiece Have Never Gone Away', New Statesman, 18 July 2018.
- 4 James Boyce, 1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2011.
- 5 Le Corbusier [1924], quoted in Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History, Routledge, London, 2016, p. 170.
- 6 See Frank J. Swetz, 'Mathematical Treasure: Ada Lovelace's Notes on the Analytic Engine', Mathematical Association of America, maa.org/press/ periodicals/convergence/ mathematical-treasure-ada lovelaces-notes-on-theanalytic-engine.
- 7 Shepard Fairey, 'Space Invader', Swindle, no. 3, p. 73.
- 8 Fairey, p. 73.





