It's More Like a Tendency*

Trajectories of the Literary in *Kentucky Route Zero*

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Introduction

After seven years of development, the final act of Cardboard Computer's *Kentucky Route Zero* was released in January of 2020 to widespread acclaim.[1] Hailed by the games scholar and critic Trevor Strunk as a "novelistic accomplishment,"[2] *Kentucky Route Zero* has consistently surprised and delighted players with its clever writing, subtly realized characters, and moody set design, while also challenging these players by continually innovating upon both its gamic and literary conventions across its five acts and five interludes. Inasmuch as *Kentucky Route Zero* might be described as "novelistic," however, the game remains a *game*, requiring players and readers alike to reconsider what such descriptors as "novelistic" might mean within the interactive space of digital games.

In responding to the prompt for this panel—"is the novel of the future a video game?"—it was precisely this descriptor (*novelistic*) that guided my analysis. Is the novel of the future *in fact* a video game? To spoil what follows, I will say now: *I do not think so.* Or, to soften the point, *Kentucky Route Zero* does not prove this to be the case. However, what became clear in my study of this remarkable game is that, as a category, the *literary* in general finds in *Kentucky Route Zero* new passages, new *trajectories*, that lead out of and away from more traditional literary forms while also being indebted to, and directly in conversation with, these very forms. This is, perhaps, a frustrating *both/and* position to take, but I hope in what follows to demonstrate just how fascinating *Kentucky Route Zero* is as an art object, a game, and a work of fiction—perhaps not the novel of the future, but something else altogether.

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[1] Jake Elliott, Tamas Kemenczy, and Ben Babbitt, *Kentucky Route Zero: PC Edition* (PC: Cardboard Computer, 2020).

[2] Trevor Strunk, "With Its Final Act, Kentucky Route Zero Became a Haunting, Literary Elegy," *EGM*, February 2020, https://egmnow.com/with-its-final-act-kentucky-route-zero-became-a-haunting-literary-elegy/.

First, I will situate *Kentucky Route Zero* in a narrow history of *literariness* in games, and specifically in the text adventure genre. Then, I will transition from this historical perspective to a formal perspective on *Kentucky Route Zero* as a piece of *interactive fiction* that can be analysed with reference to the framework elaborated by Nick Montfort in his "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction."[3] Then, lastly, I will detail the points of *textual action* throughout *Kentucky Route Zero*, diagramming their steady transformation over the course of the game's development between 2013 and 2020. I will conclude with some remarks on the prompt for this panel and the place and function of *Kentucky Route Zero* in the domain of literary art.

Literariness in Games

The question of the literary in games is a fraught one, much too complex to rehash in a panel presentation, even if we set aside such an empty conflict as the narratology/ludology debate that has haunted game studies since the early 2000s.[4] Perhaps a good place to begin, then, is Mary Ann Buckles' "Interactive Fiction as Literature,"[5] which precedes the narratology/ludology debate by over a decade. For Buckles, there is a simple corollary between works of interactive fiction like Crowther and Woods' *Adventure*[6] and the "types of popular literature [that] are based on rules, games, and the creation of fantasy worlds," such as "mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, and adventure tales."[7] Buckles does not try to idealize this correlation, however, but rather goes about constructing an open milieu of forms, conventions, and behaviours that are shared by interactive fiction and popular literature, making no reference to an ideal form of 'narrative' or 'game' that might become the subject of a narratology or a ludology. She chooses instead to attend to the concrete features of the popular genres of fiction she mentions, and their expression in the medium of computer games.

In mystery fiction, "intellectual challenge" is key—mysteries are "games in the form of stories"; in adventure fiction, "[l]ocation and physical setting dictate the process of action"—that is to say, space motivates plot; and in science fiction and fantasy, stories are concerned with the "probable consequences of a set of rules that may be different from those governing our real lives."[8] What unites these features, for Buckles, and what can be identified in early works of interactive fiction, is "a step-by-step, action-consequence type of thinking and

[3]Nick Montfort, "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction," in *IF Theory Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robbin Wheeler, Version 2 (Transcript On Press, 2011), 25–58.

[4]For a dismissal of this "blood feud" and an admirable opening of the terrain, see Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 118–30.

[5]Mary Ann Buckles, "Interactive Fiction as Literature," *BYTE Magazine* 12, no. 5 (May 1987), https://archive.org/details/byte-magazine-1987-05/page/n147/mode/2up.

[6]William Crowther and Don Woods, *Adventure* (PDP-10, 1977).

[7]Buckles, "Interactive Fiction as Literature." 135.

[8]Buckles, 135-137.

imagination."[9] Again, this is in no way some ideal form of which genre fiction and text adventures are instantiations, but rather a *preference of consumption* and a *tendency of design* characterizing the *mechanics* of these disparate mediums.

This sense of *mechanics* over and against *ideals* is key. Buckles likens the genesis of interactive fiction to the genesis of the novel. Just like interactive fiction, which arose in response to the technology of the computer, the novel arose in response to the technology of the printing press, with "prose versions of knightly verse epics" being "mass-produced for a wide audience."[10] There is nothing necessary, eternal, or *ideal* about either form, the novel or the text adventure. Both arose in response to certain technological advancements, and both express a popular desire for entertainment through story. What is distinct about each form is their *mechanics*, which are directly connected to the affordances of each form's medium, whether paper or code. Literary tropes and motivations might be shared across mediums, but what interactive fiction introduces to the literary is the possibility of "the reader's participation in creating the story and text," which we can understand as a *mechanical difference of involvement*.[11] By approaching literature from this perspective of mechanics, we can avoid fuzzy definitions and clumsy categories, focusing instead on how different texts *do* different things.

Kentucky Route Zero cannot accurately be described as a novel in the definitional or categorical way, but it remains a literary work, *doing something* unique with its words. Like a novel, it conveys a story for the general purpose of entertainment, and like the best novels it does so in a mechanically experimental way with a carefully wrought thematic structure. As such, *Kentucky Route Zero* shares in the long tradition of literary art, as much worthy of analysis as any other text that might be assigned in the literature classroom. Though *Don Quixote* (which Buckles selects as an example for its pivotal role in the history of the novel) and *Kentucky Route Zero* operate in different mediums, with different subject matter, and make use of different mechanical affordances, both texts nevertheless exhibit identifiable *tendencies in their design* that we can observe and describe. It is to this work of observation and description that we now turn.

Formalizing a Tendency

Having performed this historical groundwork, the use of Nick Montfort's "methodological framework" for analysing and interpreting interactive fiction becomes quite clear.[12] Montfort is less interested in litigating the position of this or that textual work in a given genre, and more interested in "how interactive fiction is experienced," which is to say, what interactive fiction *does* to the reader-player, or what *happens* at the interface between text and reader-player.[13] Montfort readily

[9] Buckles, 135.
[10] Buckles, 136.
[11] Buckles, 138.
[12] Montfort, "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction." 26.
[13] Montfort, 26.

acknowledges that interactive fiction is a "many-faceted" field of study, which one can approach from the perspectives of the "literary," "gaming," "poetics," and "aesthetics."[14] Indeed, *Kentucky Route Zero* easily presents itself for analysis along each of these lines.[15] But where we want to focus our attention today is on the *mechanics* of this particular piece of interactive fiction, and specifically those mechanical features of interactive fiction that set the form, and therefore *Kentucky Route Zero*, apart from traditional printed fiction. Montfort begins his essay by highlighting four such features:

1. Interactive fiction is "a text-accepting, text-generating computer program."
2. Interactive fiction is "a potential narrative, that is, a system that produces narrative during interaction."
3. Interactive fiction is "a simulation of an environment or world."
4. Interactive fiction is "a structure of rules within which an outcome is sought, also known as a game."[16]

Kentucky Route Zero is mechanically different from the novel form insofar as it possesses each of these features. Though it does not allow the reader-player to input typed text, interaction in *Kentucky Route Zero* primarily occurs through selecting between different text options, which then generate different text responses (a "*cycle*" in Montfort's terminology[17]). Because of this interaction, the story that a given reader-player will experience during a "*traversal*"[18] of *Kentucky Route Zero* is not fixed, and is therefore potential, a fact made especially clear in the latter two acts of the game. Perhaps most obviously different from the medium of the printed word, *Kentucky Route Zero* presents its story against the backdrop of a computer-animated world, in which meaningful action is performed by the reader-player without representation in text. And finally, through world navigation and light puzzle solving, the mystery with which *Kentucky Route Zero* begins is not merely a mystery that will be resolved over the course of reading, inviting the reader's efforts along the way, but must be actively resolved by the reader-player's actions. Insofar as *Kentucky Route Zero* is, therefore, a "*program, potential narrative, world* and *game*," Montfort's framework for interpreting interactive fiction applies.[19]

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[14]Montfort, 26.

[15]For instance, Alex Mitchell, in collaboration with several other scholars, has pursued the poetic angle of analysis with respect to *Kentucky Route Zero* for some time. See Alex Mitchell, "Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero," ed. Emily Flynn-Jones, *Well Played: A Journal on Video Games, Value and Meaning* 3, no. 2 (2014): 161–78, https://doi.org/10.1184/R1/6687017, Alex Mitchell, "Making the Familiar Unfamiliar: Techniques for Creating Poetic Gameplay," *Proceedings of the 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* 13, no. 1 (August 2016), http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/making-the-familiar-unfamiliar-techniques-for-creating-poetic-gameplay/, and Alex Mitchell et al., "A Preliminary Categorization of Techniques for Creating Poetic Gameplay," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 20, no. 2 (June 2020), http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/mitchell_kway_neo_sim.

[16]Montfort, "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction." 26-27.

[17]Montfort, 32.

[18]Montfort, 32.

[19]Montfort, 29.

At this juncture, we will now turn to look at *Kentucky Route Zero* in detail, conducting a mechanical analysis of its literary function. Specifically, we will attend to the *mediation* of what we have described in the abstract as 'literariness' by the four distinctive features of interactive fiction cited above, examining the ways in which the *affordances of the medium* produce new *trajectories of the literary* within this particular game text. We have taken this path, eschewing plot summaries and gameplay descriptions to this point, to ensure a strong anti-idealist position in our reading, avoiding the narratological and ludological pitfalls that would refer the object of our inquiry back to an ideal form or origin. *Kentucky Route Zero* inhabits a *milieu of forms, conventions, and behaviours*, exhibiting certain *tendencies of design* that, through Montfort's framework, can be isolated and described. Through the *medium of computation* and the *material of code*, *Kentucky Route Zero* implements specific *storytelling mechanics* that set it apart from traditional literary offerings, but not in such a way that it is entirely severed from the history of the literary. Rather, *Kentucky Route Zero* participates in a chorus of stories characterized by accident and fluctuation, choice and variation, recycling older textual forms while incorporating new technologies and making use of their affordances. In short, then, we might call this an *aleatory analysis*,[20] or better, a *study of potentials*—an approach that is especially suited to the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*.

Textual Action in *Kentucky Route Zero*

I use the phrase "textual action" to refer to the *input-output cycle* of interactive fiction, as opposed to something like 'textual agency,' to highlight the *potential* quality of the reader-player's position in *Kentucky Route Zero*, a potentiality that goes beyond even that which Montfort describes in his framework. For Montfort, the potential of interactive fiction lies in its potential *for the player*. The player has *textual agency* insofar as their interactions can produce different experiences *for them*. But in *Kentucky Route Zero*, this potential is resituated in the position *of* the player. In his paper, "Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in *Kentucky Route Zero*," Daniel Vella masterfully demonstrates this resituation of the player-position with a phenomenological-narratological reading of Act I, Scene II of the game, highlighting the ambiguity of the reader-player's *potential relation* to the figure(s) on screen.[21] Insofar as *Kentucky Route Zero* "is a game that foregrounds and thematizes its own mediation," the reader-player's position feels much more a *part* of the text itself, caught up in the game's "self-reflexive concern with its own presentation and mediality."[22] The reader-player does not exist *outside* the text, exerting their agency upon it, but rather *within* the text, acting in and being acted upon by it. As Vella demonstrates, in just a

[20]An approach I borrow from Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. Erik Butler (London, UK: Verso, 2016).

[21]Daniel Vella, "Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in *Kentucky Route Zero*," *Proceedings of the 2014 International DiGRA Nordic Conference* 11 (2014), http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/player-and-figure-an-analysis-of-a-scene-in-kentucky-route-zero/.

[22]Vella. 14.

single scene, *which action* is the player's and *which action* is the playable figure's is incredibly difficult to distinguish, and indeed, the game continuously works to mingle these active positions without ever fully reducing one to the other. Vella's single-scene analysis is remarkably thorough, taking cinematic framing, set design, and "verbal acts" into account, but for our purposes here, we will now focus on these "verbal acts" or what we are referring to more generally as *textual action* across the entirety of the game.[23]

Act I

The first scene of the game finds us outside a gas station, Equus Oils. We, the reader-player, see a truck, a man and a dog, and another person sitting in a chair. We can click an icon of an eye (a non-textual interaction) that floats above the truck and the dog, and the man will turn to look at what we select. This non-textual *input* produces a textual *output* describing what we and the man see. If we click anywhere on the ground, the man will respond to this *command* (another term for *input*) and move to the point that we clicked (already, those familiar with point-and-click adventure games will recognize this type of gameplay). As we approach the person in the chair, two floating icons appear, an eye and a text box. If we click the eye, we receive another text description, and if we click the text box, we initiate conversation. The person's name is Joseph. His speech (and most speech in the game) is represented like the text of a screenplay: "JOSEPH: Damn! Did you hear that wreck? . . . " We learn the playable figure's name through our first dialogue choice. We are playing as Conway. Joseph asks Conway the name of his dog, and we, the reader-player, get to choose (a moment of *potentiality* in the first *textual* act of play), our options highlighted in orange: Homer, Blue, or nameless (we choose Homer for this traversal). During this scene, we head into the basement of the gas station where we are introduced to three more non-textual inputs (a pointing finger to pick up an item, directional arrows to navigate between rooms, and an electrical bolt for interacting with a breaker). As well, while in the basement, a persistent icon of a lantern at the bottom centre of the screen appears, which we can click to turn our light source on and off. After completing some simple tasks and some further interactions with Joseph, we return to the truck, where a steering wheel icon indicates that we can get in the truck. When we click it, we are presented with two options, in italics, which function like stage directions: "*(It's time to go)*" or "*(CONWAY gets distracted)*."[24]

In this first scene, the narrative interaction space of *Kentucky Route Zero* is established. The mechanics that mediate *Kentucky Route Zero*'s story are:

[23] Vella, 15. In 2014, when Vella's paper was published, he only had access to the first three acts of the game (the third of which came out mere weeks before his presentation at DiGRA Nordic 2014). If he were to conduct a similar analysis today of the game in its entirety, he would see that the trends he identified only intensified through the game's development cycle.

[24] Indeed, as one of the developers, Tamas Kemenczy reports, the design of *Kentucky Route Zero* is *explicitly* modelled on theatre. See Tamas Kemenczy, "The Scenography of Kentucky Route Zero" (GDC 2014, July 2016), https://youtu.be/nh_o8JEmVdw.

1. Engaging in dialogue (textual input and output).
2. Observing the world (non-textual input, textual output).
3. Manipulating the world (non-textual input and output).
4. Moving through the world (non-textual input and output).[25]

As noted above, Daniel Vella has already examined the complexities of the potential relation between *player* and *figure* in *Kentucky Route Zero*, so we will not retread that terrain. Here, instead, our concern is with the *textual mediation* of this relation, the specific *mechanics* used to perform this mediation, and the *literariness* of the game text produced as a result. As such, what follows will focus on the first mechanic above, with reference to significant moments of the other three mechanics where necessary.

The next two scenes progress much in the same way, involving dialogue, observation, manipulation, and movement. But in Scene IV of Act I, the first surprising *textual* shift occurs. We are in Elkhorn Mine, and the scene opens on a figure we have not met yet. Her name is Shannon. She is talking on the phone, and we are given orange dialogue options to direct her side of the phone call, placing us in her position. As the call ends, Conway walks up and the dialogue icon appears, but it reads: "Stranger." In a stroke, our position as the reader-player plunges into that of Shannon. The game denies our knowledge and our agency from the prior three scenes to abruptly resituate us in the position of a different character. We have a conversation with Conway, but then the game repositions us again, our perspective shifting back to Conway, our dialogue choices his once again. For most of the subsequent scene, inside the mine, we continue to play as Conway, moving as him and speaking as him, but then at the end of the scene, we are given a simultaneous dialogue choice, Conway or Shannon, which now positions *both* characters in the playable position, *both* characters as *us*. We proceed to take control of Shannon for a short scene, moving her through a section of the mine, and then the game cuts to Conway, outside. When Shannon rejoins him, we move together to the truck, and then choose who gets to drive. Our dialogic position switches to Shannon for a moment as we have a short chat with Homer, just like Conway has done in the previous scenes. This sequence of scenes still privileges Conway, with the stage direction telling us "*(CONWAY gets back on the road)*," but already, our own position, the potential relation between player and figure, has expanded beyond the still narrow scope of this direction. Shannon has entered *the fold of protagonaity*.

Limits & Demonstrations

Before proceeding to Act II we play an interlude, the first of five, titled "Limits & Demonstrations." In this scene, we find ourselves in an art gallery where we are presented with three figures, whose names we learn, as is now the norm, via dialogue: Emily, Ben, and Bob (attentive players will remember meeting them

[25] A fifth, hybrid mechanic might be located in the stage directions, which are textual inputs with non-textual outputs, but insofar as these utilize the same conventions as dialogue, I will treat of them as if they were part of the textual 'script' of *Kentucky Route Zero*.

briefly in Act I). We, the reader-player, move and speak as Emily. The three walk around the circular space, looking at and discussing the installations on display, all of which were made by the artist Lula Chamberlain. But the conceit of the scene becomes clear when they reach the third installation, *Overdubbed Nam June Paik installation, in the style of Edward Packer.* It's a reel of magnetic tape from a tape recorder, cut up and arranged in a loose web on a wall, with a hand-held playback head connected to a speaker system. We continue to speak as Emily, but Bob takes the playback head, physically directing the interaction. When he touches the head to the tape, the speakers play the recording, and we see the voice of Lula Chamberlain displayed in static-tinged text. Then the background fades away, and all we can see is this text. We read, we listen, and this *we* dissolves in the black. A computer offers commands. Emily makes choices. Bob follows her directions. We explore the recording, a nonlinear (indeed, *unordered*) text adventure, that relays the history of Lula, Joseph (the same from the gas station), and Donald, who we have not (yet) met. In this single moment within a single scene, we see a remarkable condensation of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s narrative mechanics, and indeed, of the four key mechanics of interactive fiction Montfort identifies. Lula, in constructing the installation, constructed a piece of *interactive fiction*, which we now navigate through an input-output system of commands and replies, a navigation that is, at the same time, being navigated by *us*, the reader-player, *as* Emily (and Bob by extension). This is a rather stunning *potential doubling* of the world: that of Lula's manufacture and that of the exhibit as part of *Kentucky Route Zero.* The textual mediation at play here is profound. At one point, the computer that offers commands to Emily offers only a single option, but then we are presented with a choice to respond as either Emily or Ben. Then, moments later, the computer offers two single word commands, "Remember" or "Regret." Within the narrative of the installation, these affective acts are Lula's, but Emily *as player* is inhabiting Lula's position, and we *as Emily* inhabit Lula's position by proxy, with the effect that it is *we* who remember or regret. When we at last reach the end of the tape and the background fades back in it is like emerging from a dream. We observe one final installation, and then we leave.

Act II

We begin Act II with a close up of a woman sitting at her desk looking over some papers. Stage directions in orange tell us that this is Lula, that *we* are Lula. After reviewing some proposals, we are interrupted by another character and have a short conversation. After this exchange, Scene I proper begins. We are back with Conway, Shannon, and Homer. Throughout Scene I, we move as Conway, but we are presented with dialogue options as either Conway or Shannon. This time, at the end of the scene, the stage direction is *also* in the plural: "*(They have places to go).*" In the next scene, we arrive at an enormous warehouse, Random Access Self Storage, a name that feels like it is describing more than just the building. Conway is hurting at this point and sits down to rest while Shannon goes inside to look for a file they need. Conway can talk

to the attendant or listen to the homily playing over the P.A. We listen. It is a message for an absent congregation, but it is also a message for Conway, a message for us. The homily ends, Shannon returns, and Conway gets up. We walk a few steps, and then Conway collapses. We replay a scene from earlier, in the mine, in text only. The game lets us choose Conway's dialogue over again, changing our choices from before if we so desire. When he comes to, Shannon takes charge. In the next scene, Shannon has as many dialogue options as Conway, lending her an assertiveness that feels appropriate. Conway is losing his grip on the world, and we our grip on Conway.

The next scene, Act II, Scene V, finds us at the Museum of Dwellings, but the sense of *us* now enters into an even deeper ambiguity. We move as Conway, Shannon, and Homer, but we view them as if through security cameras. Whenever the three stop to observe one of the dwellings, a conversation occurs, but it is a conversation between residents of the museum and museum staff, the latter as whom we play. For the first time in the game, we control the movement of one set of characters and the dialogue of another set, separate from each other both spatially and temporally. *We are* Conway, and yet *we are* the museum staff. But this scene does not stop here. In one especially potent sequence, *we*, as Conway, approach a house in which there is a young girl living, Flora, whom *we*, as the museum staff, question. As they do so, the perspective shifts, the background fades to black, and *we* start narrating as Flora, recounting what Conway did inside the house, and the surreal experience that he had therein, the details of which he relayed to Flora. The only action we see is Conway entering the house, and then exiting it after Flora finishes talking. We, as Flora, choose the details, choose which potential world to realize, which narrative is communicated to us, to the museum staff, to the player. The fold of protagonaity expands further.

Act II, Scene V, ends with the group meeting another child, Ezra, and we can once again speak as Conway or Shannon in the present, not as reported to the museum staff. As we proceed to Scene VI, we find ourselves moving as Ezra, talking to Homer as Ezra, but then also speaking as Conway. We arrive at the home of a man we have been looking for, and the frame zooms in and out, and with it, our dialogic perspective: Conway, Shannon, Conway, Shannon. The final shot of Act II sees the text of Conway's conversation start to writhe and become illegible, the world desaturate, and the frame tilt. This is Conway's experience, but it is also *we*, the reader-player, who are *looking at Conway* have this experience. This is a simple strategy, but effective. Conway's own position in the world is becoming unmoored.

The Entertainment

Act II is followed by another interlude, "The Entertainment." In another first, we now find ourselves inserted in the scene in first person, where every prior scene had us interacting with and navigating the world in third person.[26] In

[26] "The Entertainment" was originally designed for Oculus VR, but is no longer playable in that form. Now, instructions from the developer direct the player to recruit seven friends and

a further instance of doubling, "The Entertainment" is a stage play created, directed, and performed by characters in the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*, featuring characters and a location that are also from the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*. Specifically, the entire play takes place at The Lower Depths tavern, and the proprietor, Harry, has a leading role (both Harry and the tavern will feature in Act III). We discover over the course of the interlude that we are not only *watching* the play, but we are in fact an *actor* in the play, the silent "bar-fly" whose reckoning finally comes, an event that occurred in the past of the game and which is now being dramatized. Where in "Limits & Demonstrations" there is only a single chain of identities—we *as* Emily *as* Lula—now we see this chaining *proliferated*—we *as* an actor *as* the bar-fly, performing alongside the actor Edgar Foy *as* Harry Esperanza, Paula Graves *as* Evelyn Hickman, and the rest of the cast. *Kentucky Route Zero*'s "self-reflexive concern with its own presentation and mediality" is here readily apparent.

Act III

Act III begins with a memory of Conway's, talking to his employer and friend Lysette. We choose his dialogue, remembering for him, bringing the world of his memory into being. Then, Act III proper begins, and once again we are given options to speak as Shannon or Conway. As the first scene progresses, we encounter a space in which our movement causes us to shift from Conway's perspective to Ezra's, dialogue and locomotion passing seamlessly between characters with the movement of the frame. Ezra has joined Shannon and Conway in the fold.

At this point, all of the textual tendencies, the openness of the textual mediation at play in *Kentucky Route Zero*, begin to intensify. In Act III, Scene II, Shannon makes a phone call, and we choose the responses from the other end, or rather, we choose the *affect* of these responses because the voice is inaudible to the *camera* with which we are viewing the scene. The scene cuts to two figures on a motorbike, one driving and one riding in the sidecar: Junebug and Johnny. We speak as Junebug. We cut back to Conway, Shannon, and Ezra, and the duo on the bike speed by, before turning back to join them. As the five speak with each other, we can choose from an equal number of dialogue options for Conway, Shannon, or Ezra, and we even get to speak as Junebug for a moment, naming her and Johnny's motorbike (just like in Act I, Scene I, when we named Conway's dog). This traversal, we call it *The Weird Vector*, which seems to capture the proliferating lines of identity running through Act III.

The following scene finds our group at The Lower Depths where Junebug and Johnny are set to perform. They take the stage, and we are introduced to yet another new textual modality. Large, semi-cursive words appear against the stars above the tavern, lacking the usual black box against which all other text in the game is set. And Junebug *sings*. There have been other songs with vocalized

stage the performance live. See http://kentuckyroutezero.com/the-entertainment/vr.txt.

lyrics that have played before this one, but now a character that we know, whom we have played as, whom we *are*, even if tenuously, *sings*, and importantly, *we get to choose her words*. We choose between a few options for her lyrics, and then our choice becomes a part of her song, a part of the music itself. Once again, like in "The Entertainment," we are part of the performance—indeed, *we are performing*, our play doubled. From this point on, we are regularly presented with options to speak as Junebug.

In the next scene, we meet several nonplayer characters who will feature only briefly, but one of whom we have heard of at several points prior in the game: Donald, an old colleague of Lula's and Joseph's. He introduces us to his masterwork, the computer system Xanadu. He tells us of its "ornate labyrinths of memory," describing it as "a shrine to perfect simulation." A few scenes from now, we will be able to enter Xanadu, which operates like a classic text adventure, a more proper text adventure, even, than *Kentucky Route Zero*.[27] When we do, Conway types commands which we, as Shannon, Ezra, or Junebug choose, and which are enacted by an avatar of Donald in the game itself. *Kentucky Route Zero* is hyper-aware of the performance that is carried out here, and indeed, takes pains to highlight this performance as such. At one point, we can comment on the writing (Donald's writing) as Junebug, critiquing it as "Wordy" or "Vain." This is a *literary* critique, because Xanadu is a *literary* work, before being some "perfect simulation." This is not to deny the *reality* of Xanadu, relegating it to the realm of irrelevance with the dismissal, *it's only fiction*, but rather to acknowledge that Xanadu, as a work of literature, *does something* in the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*, and we can describe what *happens* at the interface between game and players (Conway, Shannon, Ezra, and Junebug) in the same way that we can describe what *happens* between *Kentucky Route Zero* and ourselves. In case players had missed the self-reflexive doubling of "Limits & Demonstrations" or "The Entertainment," Xanadu makes this doubling plain, reproducing the game, *Kentucky Route Zero*, itself *to the letter*.

To invoke this phrase, *to the letter*, at this point is to acknowledge the *how* of literary simulation that is at work in *Kentucky Route Zero*, rather than to assert some tautological logic of identity, essence, or ideality. The mechanics of this *potential world* are presented primarily through text, and significant moments of character, set dressing, and cinematic framing are all *textually mediated*. Unlike a novel, our chief point of comparison here, *Kentucky Route Zero* allows its text to be transformed by our action, by we, the reader-player. To ask which traversal of the game is authoritative, what the dog's and the motorcycle's *actual* names are, is pointless. As Lula remarks in a quiet moment during our exploration of

[27]Xanadu begins much like Crowther and Woods's *Adventure*, which inaugurated the genre in 1977. However, Donald's "faultless [. . .] oracle" does not simulate a world out of the pages of *Dungeons & Dragons* but, like Crowther's prototype of *Adventure* from 1975 (before Woods's involvement), simulates the world itself. See William Crowther, *Adventure* (PDP-10, 1975). Will Crowther was a spelunker and the original iteration of *Adventure* was a simulation of the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, a technological, historical, and geographical space in which *Kentucky Route Zero* is self-reflexively working.

Xanadu, this world is a "dangling copy, with no original." And as is consistently the case with *Kentucky Route Zero*, the question *which world, really*, remains open.

When we leave Donald and his computer, we are given a scene that fills in a previous gap in the story. Act III, Scene XII begins in identical fashion to Act III, Scene VII. While Scene VII is a brief interlude between scenes in Xanadu, in which we move and speak as Ezra, Scene XII presents us with the other side of this story, beginning with us moving and speaking as Conway. We enter a building with Shannon, and then ride a secret elevator down into the Hard Times Distillery, where we are met by an electromagnetic skeleton named Doolittle (again, attentive players will recall that a "Lem Doolittle" was the writer of the plays combined into the performance seen in "The Entertainment")—or rather, we, *as Doolittle*, meet two "Visitors" who have stumbled into our workplace. In similar fashion to Act II, Scene V, in the Museum of Dwellings, we move one character while speaking as another, but now the perspective is reversed. We move as Doolittle, guiding Conway and Shannon on a tour of the distillery, while we control Conway and Shannon's dialogue. What unfolds is surreal, the conversation unnerving, and time itself feels wrong. Scene XII takes much longer than Scene VII, even though they are constructed in such a way as to be taking place during the same segment of time. Near the end of the scene, while we examine a truck, we can drift away into Conway's memories and, like the beginning of Act III, bring the world of his recollection into being. Now, however, this world is entirely textual, memories displayed in grey italics, with our choices, using the third person "he" for Conway, in the standard orange. And then, at the end, locomotive control shifts from Doolittle to Conway, only to have that control snatched away. Doolittle offers Conway a drink, and the context of the preceding makes it clear that Conway should definitely not accept. But if we wait too long, the game itself takes our mouse and clicks the icon for us. The radical potentiality of the narrative that has characterized *Kentucky Route Zero* up to this point collapses in a moment—if only for a moment—to ensure that this action happens. A single word, "Drink," is less something *we*, the reader-player choose, but something that is chosen *for us*, something the game *acts out* whether we go along with it or not.

Here and There Along the Echo

Act III is followed by another interlude, "Here and There Along the Echo," which is played from a first person perspective like "The Entertainment." This time, however, we find ourselves looking at a phone, which we can pick up and use to call into a help-line for "drifters and pilgrims" who find themselves on the Echo River.[28] Time to complete for this interlude varies greatly with the patience

[28] Like "The Entertainment," "Here and There Along the Echo" was also designed with 'live' play in mind. A listing on eBay appeared for a physical phone that could only dial one number (the one found in the game), and that same number could also be called on a real telephone, which would bring callers to the same interface as that in the game. See Charlie Hall, "Kentucky Route Zero's Latest Interlude Requires a Phone . . . a Telephone," *Polygon*,

and curiosity of the player (there is a cryptographic quality to the help-line[29]), but whenever the phone is hung up, we discover that we were playing as Emily, and that she is once again on the move with Ben and Bob. At this point, such sudden discoveries of *who* precisely it is we *are* are not surprising.

Act IV

If Act III saw a significant intensification of textual tendencies from the prior two acts, Act IV shatters any mechanical norms that *Kentucky Route Zero* had previously established. Act III was released in May of 2014, but Act IV would not be released until July of 2016, the longest gap in development to that point. In Act IV, we can see the perspective time brings to the creative process, and a transformation in the sensibilities of the developers. The act begins aboard a ferry, The Mucky Mammoth, with a character whom we may or may not have seen before (depending on how exploratory the reader-player has been): Will. He is talking to himself, working on a difficult piece of machinery, and we choose what he says—indeed, *we are the ones to whom we are talking.* Then, Junebug appears, and we shift to her perspective, talking to Will *as* Junebug. After this conversation, Act III, Scene I proper begins. We are still on The Mucky Mammoth, but now we are playing as Shannon, talking to Will from her point of view (notably, Shannon is wearing Conway's jacket[30]). Ezra comes on stage and control passes from Shannon to him. He talks to Will, and then goes inside the ferry, where we find Conway with the rest of the group. Ezra talks to them, and then control and our perspective shift once again, to Conway, as whom we move outside. Shannon comes to join him, and they talk, we talk, *as* Shannon, to Conway, as whom we were playing only moments before. And all the while, the camera has been smoothly panning around the ferry, shifting focus from exterior to interior and back again, perfectly choreographed with the shifting spotlight of this performance. This is a stage play, a scripted piece of theatre that we perform live, the actor for each of these singular beings.

This sequence on the barge cuts to black, and then the game zooms out to an abstract scene of The Mucky Mammoth on the Echo River (iterating on the other abstract overworlds of the game, which we have not had the space to consider here—though significantly, we the player do not control our transit here, unlike the prior overworlds we have navigated). Text narration overlays the scene, but for the first time the narration is in the first person, without speaker names,

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October 2014, https://www.polygon.com/2014/10/30/7131767/kentucky-route-zero-interlude-telephone-the-echo.

[29]See, for instance, VShadow, "[Solved!] Strange Mystery "Numbers" on Phone in Here and There Along the Echo (Spoilers)," *Steam Community*, November 2014, https://steamcommunity.com/app/231200/discussions/0/620695877410574318/.

[30]Popular commentary has recognized the significance of the jacket, with Redditor pirateguy7 proffering the "Conway's Jacket Theory," that "Conway's jacket is a symbolic marker for the main character of the game." This identification of a "main character" is, I would contend, off base, but pirateguy7 has intuited the *tendency* that I have been describing in detail here. See pirateguy7, "Conway's Jacket Theory," *Reddit*, May 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/kentuckyroutezero/comments/8hz5jr/conways_jacket_theory/.

leaving the screenplay format aside. If we pay attention, we can figure out that it is Will who is talking, recounting a tale of the motley crew who joined him and Cate, the vessel's captain, to sail down the Echo. He tells the story in the past tense, as if he is speaking to some unknown third party—or perhaps it is we to whom he is speaking, filling in for his absent audience. Once again, we are the ones being addressed, we are the ones upon whom the text is acting.

Each scene of Act IV begins with a choice: stay aboard or disembark the Mammoth. In the first, we choose as Ezra to *stay* or *follow*. If we choose *stay*, we play as Ezra aboard the ferry, but if we choose *follow*, we play as Junebug and Johnny, a shift in perspective away from Ezra that is subtly indexed by our choice of verb. In the latter version of Scene II, our perspective oscillates between Johnny and Junebug, with Johnny finally being welcomed into the fold of protagonaity with his first full conversations that we, the reader-player, enact.

In the subsequent sequence of narration, *Kentucky Route Zero* introduces choice to Will's monologue, nuancing our perspective yet again. He remarks on scenery along the Echo, and we get to choose certain details, filling in Will's memory, bringing the world into being. The next scene, Scene III, gives us the option to *retreat* or *follow* as Shannon, and in both we primarily speak and move as her. The *retreat* variation hews closely to her perspective, but if we choose to *follow* the group ashore, there are moments where we will shift to Junebug and Johnny, and even Patch, the bartender whom we meet there. When we return to the Mammoth, we set sail again, Will narrates, and we fill in the world further with our choices, settling into this rhythm, the action of the river, drawn along by this current of diffuse textuality.

The textual mediation of *Kentucky Route Zero* diffuses further in Scene IV, a *generalized textuality* that renders our position as reader-player almost entirely free-floating. We can choose to *lounge* as Homer and the ship's dog, Valkyrie, or *stop* as Clara (a musician on tour who joined us at the beginning of Act IV), Cate, and "I" (Will, continuing to refer to himself in the first person). It is a short scene if we lounge as the dogs, a vignette of creaturely life. If we *stop*, we find ourselves at a phone, the same phone from "Here and There Along the Echo." The scene opens with us as Ezra, and then it shifts as the adults take turns on the phone. The frame is bisected by a diagonal line, and our perspective moves to the right so that the scene on the other end of the line can be displayed. Will checks his messages (actual voice recordings with text transcripts), and the game reverts to the more familiar stage commands of earlier acts, prompting us to continue listening with the orange text: "*(WILL listens to the next message)*." After we finish with Will, we shift to Cate, then Shannon, and then Clara, and are treated on the left side to brief snapshots of the world beyond the strange domains in which we have been wandering. Once everyone has made their calls, we get back on the ferry and continue on, repeating the cycle once again.

At the next stop, we choose for Ezra to *teach us* a game or for "Shannon, Ezra, the old man, and I" to *stop*. Like the previous scene, these choices suppose the focal position of Will, inserting himself into the stage directions in the first

person. If we stay, we play as Ezra teaching a card game to the others; if we stop, we control Shannon as she completes a series of psychological tests at a research lab, the Radvansky Center, to make some pocket change. However, like in the Museum of Dwellings, at the Radvansky Center we play a recording, over which two characters we have never met, Mimi and Jenn, talk. As we complete the tests and fill out a questionnaire, Mimi and Jenn try to interpret our responses, in-between catching up on each other's lives. Though the action is focused on Shannon, the text traces lines outward from the recording, making connections with events and places in both the past and future of our present traversal of the game. It is a book bound without a cover, or even page numbers, a story perpetually *in the middle.* Indeed, Will says as much in the subsequent narration if we choose not to stop and play the card game instead:

> Nobody seemed too interested in the lab stop that night. They stayed aboard and played a card game. I read a book. Let me tell you about it: I actually only read a bit from the middle... The two had cause to reflect on the history of their work together. Something got messed up—a document misplaced or filed under the wrong heading... I wasn't really paying close attention to that part, but the event prompted a long conversation about the procedural history of their work together, and that illustrated a history of their friendship in broad, suggestive strokes.

Will is describing the scene from the other timeline, this moment of extreme metatextuality threatening to shatter the boundaries of the game itself. A bifurcating path, two parallel but mutually exclusive narratives, and yet the one, a conversation with we the player-character as its object, becomes the material for a book in the other, the contents of which are narrated by a person who seems to occupy the very fabric of our experience, reporting back to us on our actions as if we were someone *else* altogether. The potentiality of interactive fiction here makes this *literary effect* possible. The *mechanics of the narrative* push us away from a determinate reading of the text, and yet invite us into a *singular* knowledge (that is, the absolute particularity of Mimi and Jenn's relationship) remixed and re-presented through a different medium.

The next scene presents us with the option, "I took a nap" (as Will), or to *help* Cate as Ezra. If we take a nap, we do not play as Will, who is of course sleeping, but as Ezra (once again enacting a closure of the other path, but bringing another world into being in the same stroke). We explore the ship, and eventually come upon Will, who turned on a lecture to help him sleep, in which the lecturer discusses some of Thomas Edison's more esoteric ideas. If we choose to help Cate instead, we go ashore a small island with her, playing as Ezra. However, the *as* of this scene continues to break down the conventions of possible interactions in the game. On the island, we are presented with a single set piece, but the text box inset at the top of the screen is bisected in similar fashion to how the frame itself was bisected during the stop at the phone discussed above. On the left, we inhabit Cate's perspective, and on the right, Ezra's. But even this

distinction is fuzzy, as the two panels of the text box somewhat overlap, and the characters regularly cross over the divide. We are presented with dialogue and stage directions for both Cate and Ezra in the usual orange, and their thoughts follow in white italics. But then a third textual modality is re-introduced, grey italics, to signify memories that are interwoven with the action of the scene. We must click on both sides of the divide, progressing the narrative in each panel in tandem. Sometimes, one side will stop, waiting for us to catch up on the other, and sometimes one or the other character will interject on the other's side, responding to a question or interrupting their reflection. Near the end of the scene, the two sides converge, but importantly, they are not combined. At one moment, both panels read: "*(CATE and EZRA look up at an old battleship drifting by)*," their perspective distinct, yet fixed on the same event taking place in the world before them, an event to which we, too, are witness. After more conversation, more thought, more recollection, the scene reaches its conclusion, but before it can end we must click the icon to close the text box on both sides of the divide, again acknowledging the singularity of the two characters on screen. The textuality of this scene constructs a radical *narrative equality* for its two participants, a positioning which is assured by the *mutuality of interaction* structuring our involvement as the reader-player.

To this point, Act IV has been a virtuoso performance on the part of the developers, far exceeding any of the mechanical tactics of the prior acts. Now, however, as we return to the Mammoth, our parallel trajectories begin to tend toward each other, the performance taking on an edge. The next choice with which we are presented is merely a choice for an extra scene, but again, this is a *potential narrative* that some players may not realize in their traversals of the game. If we choose to *help* we stay aboard with Shannon, Ezra, and Will, shifting between Ezra and Shannon over the scene's duration. But when this scene concludes, we are shunted, without alternative, into the other choice, to *set out* with Shannon, Conway, and Homer. There is a fatedness to this path, a closure of potentiality, much like the scene at the end of Act III where the game wrests the mouse from our control to force Conway to drink. In this scene, we pilot a small dinghy as Conway, but illuminate the path forward as Shannon, as whom we also speak. When we reach our destination, Shannon gets out of the dinghy to talk with some nonplayer characters. After these conversations conclude, she turns to see Conway in another boat, taken by the Hard Times boys, or rather, given over to them, welcoming his end at last, the end that was sealed by that unchosen drink. Our last act in the scene is as Homer, for the first and potentially only time: to follow Conway, or to return to the ship with Shannon. If we choose the former, we will not be seen again.

The narration that follows this scene is the only narration in Act IV that is not from Will's perspective, taking Shannon's instead, in the third person. Like Will's, we get to shape the text of the world, choosing who Shannon meets as she pilots the dinghy back to the Mammoth. In a nice touch, the game responds to our input with appropriate animations. The next scene is primarily played as Shannon, too, though we can choose to sigh as Homer in response to Shannon's

attention, get to briefly control Ezra, and even act as Sam for a short while, one of the joint-proprietor's of the restaurant at which we stop. The end of the scene ensures that our attention is fixed on Shannon, however, offering us two simple, sorrowful stage directions: "*(She returns to the tugboat)*" or "*(She listens to the river)*." She and Conway's *they* is no more, our *we* is no more. A member of our fold is gone, torn from our narrative world.

After this scene, Will takes up his role as narrator once again, bringing us to the final major scene of the act. Here, Clara, the touring musician, performs. If we have played enough of the shipboard scenes, we can choose to *help* Clara as Ezra, viewing the performance and the audience from aboard the Mammoth. The alternative is to *watch* the show as Junebug and Johnny, looking up at Clara on the Mammoth. If we choose the latter, we remember, in the first person, another concert of Clara's that Johnny and Junebug once attended. Our memories, Junebug's mostly, but perhaps Johnny's too, are presented in grey italics, and we, the reader-player, get to choose what is remembered, the events that occurred, opening and closing doors to different potential worlds.

The act ends with a short scene in the Silo of Late Reflections, looking down on our group from above: Shannon, Ezra, Junebug, Johnny, Clara, and Homer (if we chose to stay). In the narration preceding this scene, Will is sure to note how many of our party are missing, one or two, depending on our previous choices.

Un Pueblo de Nada

While the prior interludes have been formally daring, "Un Pueblo de Nada" is the most unique, mechanically, of any scene in the game. We take up an over-the-shoulder third person perspective, and quickly discover that we are playing as Emily, in her producer role at the public television station WEVP-TV.[31] We are once again *putting on a show*. Our thoughts are presented in italics in a text box at the bottom of the scene, and we are afforded choice here (though not always), expressing ourselves not, primarily, through dialogue but through introspection. Our cursor takes the shape of WEVP-TV's logo, and when we mouse over significant details, white lines are traced over the objects we are looking at, like doodles in a notebook or highlights on an overhead projector (one of which also materially features in the scene). Ben and Bob are here too, along with some new characters: Rita, Ron, Maya, Nikki, and Slow Moe Crow (an actual crow with whom everyone seems to be able to communicate). All of these characters will feature in Act V. The scene plays out in almost real time, like the recording of an actual television broadcast, and we, the reader-player, are swept along in the performance, the broadcast, solving problems, fretting about the show, becoming producers ourselves. Outside, a storm rages, and it is this storm that brings the interlude to a thunderous close, and which will materially shape the stage for the final act of the game.

[31] The channel can be 'reached' at http://wevp.tv, where a live-action version of the interlude can be watched.

Act V

Where Act IV took over two years after the previous act to be completed, Act V took almost four, with the game not seeing a complete release until January of 2020. However, in this final act, consisting of just a single scene, the remarkable literary performance that is *Kentucky Route Zero* is fully realized.

Thoroughly freed of typical player-figure constraints in Act IV, in Act V, we *are* the game itself. *The world speaks, and we are it.* We play as a cat, just a cat, and yet this cat understands human language and hears the past, bringing this world *which we are* into being through our interactions.

Act V is structured as a single, circular stage, with the hole that is the Silo of Late Reflections at the centre. We control the locomotion of a small cat, using a glowing white dragonfly to direct it around the map. At the bottom of the screen, where the lantern icon previously appeared, we are given periodic opportunities to speak as the cat, meowing at people and other creatures we meet by clicking the non-textual icons that appear (which can only be described as *squiggles*). At other points, we will approach different groupings of the now significantly expanded cast of characters and engage in conversation, speaking as familiar characters like Shannon, Clara, Ezra, and Junebug, new characters from the interlude like Maya, Nikki, Ron, Rita, Emily, and Slow Moe Crow, and even more characters, either new to Act V, like Clyde and Elmo, or from previous scenes, like Mary Ann (who players might remember from an exchange in Act II). The sheer volume of narrative positions we inhabit is staggering.

But this is not all. Whenever we see an eye icon appear in the world, a black text box will appear to present narration of past events. Ghosts walk the world before our eyes, and we sit as the cat and watch, while at the same time we *are* these ghosts, we *are* this memory. Certain words in the text are highlighted in orange, but unlike any prior dialogue or stage directions in the game, these appear in the middle of paragraphs, and lead us down different paths of discovery and recollection. Some of the histories of which we learn are from the distant past, echoes of the 'People of Nothing' who once lived here. Other histories are more recent, featuring characters in the narrative present of the game like Nikki, Clyde, and Ron. This is yet another new form of textual mediation that opens new potentialities for being in and understanding the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*, further dissolving our privileged position as *agent* and emphasizing our status as *just another actor*.

The scene is broken up by three black screens with large, capitalized text that speak primarily in the first person plural: *we*. We circle the silo as the cat, meowing, talking, remembering. Time passes. The storm waters begin to subside. We set to work rebuilding. And in the final sequence, we gather for a funeral, arrayed around the grave of two horses who were trapped and drowned during the storm. Their death is inexplicable, purposeless, but we gather to mourn them, those who knew them and those who did not, those whom we have been for some time, those whom we have been for only a little while, and even those who

haunt the stage, ghosts long past of other unknown, yet-to-be-known, *potential* selves.

Emily sings. We sing. We all sing. And the funeral ends. We disperse in small groups, leaving the grave behind us, but as if by some sort of gravity, we find ourselves together again in the strange white structure on the other side of town that the WEVP-TV crew say appeared over night. We have been moving furniture into it all day, making a space, making something new, something that never *was* before us, and yet has always been *for us*. In one traversal, it was a library; in another, a music venue; and in the most recent, it became a kitchen and communal dining room. In each traversal, it was ours. As the frame zooms out, the world bathed in the light of the setting sun, we are here with one another. Or perhaps, truly, simply: *we are*.

Death of the Hired Man

The final interlude functions like an epilogue or an end credits scene that plays out much like "The Entertainment." We look upon the scene from a fixed, first-person perspective, watching a TV that sits above the bar at The Lower Depths. This time, however, we are at the actual bar, not a staged version of it. Harry himself speaks, neither we nor an actor playing his part. He talks to Carrington, a recurring character who has spent the duration of *Kentucky Route Zero* trying to stage an experimental performance of Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," which is the primary inspiration for Conway's character and narrative arc. Carrington's performance was a failure, with neither actors nor audience turning up for the show, and yet still we hear of Carrington's ambitions, his vision for the play, his interpretation of the poem, and so too his interpretation of Conway's story, the story we ourselves experienced *as* Conway. Emily chimes in, for good measure, though this time we do not speak *as* her, but simply hear her voice, reading the text of her words. And then game ends for good.

Conclusion

In the first interlude of the game, "Limits & Demonstrations," as Emily, Ben, and Bob explore the interactive art installation, Lula and Donald talk while they look for an entrance to the cave system in which we will later meet Donald in the flesh. Donald calls out, "It's a trail," and Lula responds, Emily responds, *we* respond: "It's more like a tendency. There tend to be fewer plants here, on the path we've been walking." It is precisely this kind of *tendency* that we have been pursuing here.

This *study of potentials* began in response to the question: *is the novel of the future a video game*? To recapitulate the preceding, based on our analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero*, I would contend: *no*, it is not. However, insofar as this study attempted an *anti-idealist* reading of Cardboard Computer's remarkable game, positioning it in a *literary milieu* constituted by the open array of all

textual creations, we discovered instead a field of *mechanics* and *affordances* that present themselves for our *use*.

Using Montfort's framework, we specified the four mechanical aspects of interactive fiction that set the form apart from other textual modes, but again, such an effort is not intended to draw clear, essentializing lines between genres, but rather to identify what different literary styles can *do*, the *mechanics* by which they do so, and the *effects* that this doing has on the reader.

Having laid this groundwork, we proceeded to analyse *Kentucky Route Zero* in detail, with special interest paid to the steady expansion and transformation of *textual action* in the game over the course of its development. *Kentucky Route Zero* is a game uniquely concerned with the *textual mediation* of its world, and through the proliferation of *mediatory mechanics*, it is able to make this mediation the focus of its literary art. Indeed, by this mediation, *Kentucky Route Zero* effects a *multiplication of potentiality* and an opening of the *fold of protagonaity*, so dismantling conventional constructions of subject and world, player and figure. But, at the same time, the *generalized textuality* of *Kentucky Route Zero* promotes a radical *narrative equality* and *mutuality of interaction* that does not see the supersession and abandonment of singular beings, but rather their *sheltering* and *remembrance*.

It is on this final point that I want to focus, offering a ground both for further readings of *Kentucky Route Zero* and for further responses to the question motivating this panel. In Act IV, Scene I, Will begins his narration of our actions with the following remark: "I personally believe a story gets *more* true as it's tossed around from brain to brain and the whole community brings their insight to bear on the brittle facts of experience." Then, as we are listening to the lecture recording in Act IV, Scene VI, the lecturer regales us with Edison's theory of a " 'swarm' of interchangeable ... 'proletarian' ... life units" that animate memory, cognition, and life itself. It would be easy to read such statements as arguments for relativism and pantheistic oneness, but I would challenge that the *narrative mechanics* of the game, as I have exhaustively catalogued them here, undermine such claims. The game *mechanically* values the *singular one*, the proletarian *life*, irreducible to some interchangeable life *unit*, and yet the singular one is ontologically held in a profound *equality* with ever other singular one. The royal *we* which I have employed profusely throughout this paper, and which the game itself explicitly invokes in Act V, does not signal the abandonment of the individual, but rather a *witness to the individual held in openness to every other*. What is more, this openness is not predicated on an ontological duality of self and other, but rather on the contingent ground of a *generic difference*. This notion of generic difference I derive from the philosopher François Laruelle, but it is perhaps best summarized by his commentator, the scholar Alexander Galloway: generic difference is that which speaks of the one who is "merely a finite and generic one: *this* one; this one *here*; this one here *in person*."[32] This

[32] Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii.

is an anti-idealist position to take, one which, I believe, *Kentucky Route Zero* supports: the "one is never the Whole or the All," but *this one*.[33]

With respect to the panel question, again, I will emphasize, the novel of the future is *not* a video game, nor should *Kentucky Route Zero* be labelled a novel. But, on this ground of *generic difference*, we can, perhaps, leave more essentializing responses to this question aside and pay attention instead to the vast panoply of mechanics with which we can, across mediums, *perform the literary* (a term I use with the most *nominal* of intention), and which we may mix and match, adopt and transform, hopefully producing further literature-expanding hybrid texts like *Kentucky Route Zero* in the process.

[33]Galloway, xii.

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