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"WE ARE MERE GARDENERS IN THE RUINS"

Kentucky Route Zero and Modeling Collaborative Human Dignity in the Information Age

JAE SHARPE

IN ACT I OF *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013–20), a delivery driver-protagonist named Conway helps a woman named Weaver fix the image on her old tele-vision set, failing to realize as he does so that she is a ghost.[1] As the flickering of the television resolves into a picture of a nearby barn, the diegetic layers of the game's reality themselves change, with the walls of the interposed build-ings breaking off to reveal one entrance to the game's enigmatic highway, the Zero, running through a cavern. The fluidity of the real here signals to the player that electronic devices are inextricable from the physical topologies in which they are produced and used, and these devices act as a means by which the game can consider how channels, both digital and geographic, function as connective tissue, hyperlink-like, among local communities even as they generate waste in their wake. One of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s primary concerns is that of e-waste: images of burning or destroyed electronics are a primary feature of the game's aesthetic. What, the story asks, comes after the sandbox of hypertexts, poststructuralism, and metafiction, reliant as the digital man-ifestations of these movements are on the production of consumer gadgets?

Critics such as Jussi Parikka have called attention to the impossibility of di-vorcing media technologies from the material dimensions through which they arise, and *Kentucky Route Zero* prompts us to consider what happens when these virtual forms, never as disembodied as one might assume, find them-selves susceptible to corruption, poverty, or rot.[2] Among the game's most strik-ing qualities is its marriage of the electronic with decay and death: Shannon Marquez, one of the game's playable characters, receives messages from Weaver (her dead cousin) through broken televisions, and electronics throughout the game become not only gateways for the dead but also, through their status as physically damaged artifacts, stand-ins for the problems of structural de-cay in Appalachian communities—such as physical health and the deteriora-

tion of physical local infrastructure—that have been obscured by a focus on abstract, digital modalities of communal life in the Internet Age.[3] *Kentucky Route Zero* examines stereotypes about Appalachian life—those concerning poverty, industrial labor, substance abuse, and racial and national identity, among others—with a critical eye, considering the historical precedents that have led to the creation and circulation of such stereotypes. Stereotypes arise and circulate in part through their divorce from historical context and nuance. Part of the game's project is building into the gameplay experience the narrative space necessary for the player's exploration of such nuance. As a text-heavy game, one that involves more reading than traditional video games and thus makes gameplay a necessarily slower, more contemplative experience, *Kentucky Route Zero* centers the importance of Appalachian histories in understanding (and determining) the actions of the game's characters.

Kentucky Route Zero is an independent multiplatform game produced by the studio Cardboard Computer, which released its first act in 2013. The game's point-and-click mechanics are complemented by a hypertextual narrative and low-poly graphics that incorporate a wealth of experimental features, both formal and referential, bracketing the primary story that it tells about the U.S. South.[4] *Kentucky Route Zero* uses the form of the video game to bring different issues rooted in Appalachian histories into correspondence with one another and with their modern consequents. The visual aspects of game design allow the writers of Cardboard Computer to situate narratives of Appalachian politics physically alongside magical and technological elements on the player's screen. The story is structured as five acts, with its fifth and final act released in January 2020, and it features a wealth of intertextual references that provide evidence of the game's relevance not only to the canons of American film and literature, but also to poststructuralism as a movement with international forms and a relationship to the digital humanities.

Despite its status as a game from a small, independent studio, *Kentucky Route Zero* has received critical attention from such venues as IGN and Polygon, which has amplified its popularity.[5] The computer game format of *Kentucky Route Zero* introduces players to the U.S. South and many of its attendant social and political phenomena in a way that is interactive, immersive, and, most crucially, more accessible than much of the extant literature dealing with the U.S. South's complex history of labor and class throughout the twentieth century. In making use of a popular, easily accessible medium like a computer game, *Kentucky Route Zero* draws on the historical relationship of the U.S.

labor movement to easily shareable forms of popular media such as political cartoons and protest music.

The game is set in an imagined area of Kentucky around the region of Mammoth Cave National Park and the Green River and follows the efforts of Conway, an aging truck driver, to deliver the last package from a failing antiques business to an address that seems not to exist: 5 Dogwood Drive. Later flashbacks in the game reveal that Conway is struggling to come to terms with his own aging and that he has relied heavily on the business for not only his livelihood, but also for his sense of self, given his history of low-wage work and the alcoholism that has prevented him from keeping other jobs. In the course of Conway's attempts to locate Dogwood Drive, he is directed onto the Zero, a mysterious highway that exists in a state adjacent to reality, and in which the game's surreal elements become explicit. Driving with Shannon, Conway observes that they continually pass the same location, and a character later makes reference to trying "to unwind that damned tangled highway," a suggestion that the Zero's seemingly straightforward circular shape may be as illusory as its apparent function. The player shares in this confusion, becoming responsible for guiding the characters along the Zero: while the early parts of Act I involve driving on realistically structured Kentucky roadways. Given an aerial view, we see that the Zero—true to its name—is designed as a ring and is navigated not like the branching highways of the surface, but by the user going clockwise or counterclockwise until they hit one of the Zero's topographical markers and then reversing direction.

Although the gameplay involves directing the playable characters by using a point-and-click mechanism, *Kentucky Route Zero* functions primarily as a hypertext. The game's story is driven through a series of dialogue options that appear on the screen, through which the player can determine how the characters behave. While the characters' identities are largely fixed, the player can access different details about their backstories based on the dialogue choices made. The hypertext, a literary form that is predominantly digital, offers different narrative choices based on reader input, which often take the form of clickable hyperlinks. Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1990) is one of the genre's earliest texts, and similarly structured hypertexts have evolved into gamified forms, with one notable example being the widespread hypertextual platform Twine, which allows users to create text-based narrative games that incorporate internal hyperlinks.[6]

The hyperlink in *Kentucky Route Zero* represents a communal form—a

structural logic that involves communal interaction by means of incidental discovery. The hyperlink, like the highway, relies on impulse and chance encounters, becoming a logic of the accidental that encourages local encounters. New media theorists such as Lev Manovich and Alexander Galloway have considered how the "logic of selection" becomes aestheticized in digital forms, and the logic of the accidental encounter, in this game, privileges human dignity, not only encouraging the player to meet and learn the histories of other characters, but also revealing overarching connective power structures, in the form of Consolidated Electric, that have given rise to the area's social difficulties.[7] The name of the corporation itself is not an accident: experiences of the local and incidental that comprise the majority of gameplay stand in direct contrast to the Consolidated's interest in efficiency, organization, and a hegemonic programmatical life.

Manovich has suggested a definition of new media that expands it beyond the boundaries of its associations with computers, emphasizing how new media is indebted to the technical innovations of cinema, and especially to avant-garde understandings of space and the formal manipulation of objects; and *Kentucky Route Zero* foregrounds these influences by making use of visual techniques that recall the work of the video artists of the 1960s and 1970s.[8] The WEVP-TV website, which publishes teasers for the game in the form of broadcasts from a fictionalized local television station, cites the work of Jon Cates and Phil Morton, linking to a digital reproduction of Morton's seminal COPY-IT-RIGHT manifesto.[9] Morton founded the Video Department at Chicago, which would later become a nexus for the Video Art movement and be used by the married couple Steina and Woody Vasulka, among other pioneers of the form. Morton assisted in the creation of the Sandin Image Processor and penned "NOTES ON THE AESTHETIC OF 'copying-an-Image Processor'" (1973), a manifesto guiding derivative use of his processor work.[10] COPY-IT-RIGHT represented an important step toward the open-source, technologically collaborative communities that are structured as horizontal and rhizomatic, rather than as hierarchical.[11] These new forms of artistic sharing function as an ethical model for the same interest in collaboration that guides the exploratory structure of the game—the stories that players choose to listen to from the characters they encounter fleshing out *Kentucky Route Zero*'s narrative world.

Game artist Tamas Kemenczy's interest in experimental film also elucidates the game's plethora of weird visual effects: walls and ceilings fragment and fall away during important character interactions, foregrounds and back-

grounds become visually confused (and, at times, interchangeable), and while in the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, the characters broach the question as to whether they are currently inside or outside. The epistemological uncertainty here—and the game's broader unwillingness to clarify the veracity of its surreal incidents—reflects the game's larger interest in positioning the player as partially responsible for the construction of meaning that emerges. The game's visuals are heavily stylized, with trees having diamonds as leaves, and its environments offer more of a low-poly impression of the organic than any attempt at realistic rendering. In this way, the game emphasizes its own fictionality and its understanding of itself as a digital artifact akin to those that appear to the characters within the diegesis.

Though these formal features are a striking part of the gameplay experience, Alexander Galloway has called attention to the political dimensions of new media and to the failure of theoretical premises that emphasize its "poetics and pure formalism." Galloway deviates from critics like Manovich, who, like "Kittler or Marshall McLuhan, [. . .] may discuss the embeddedness of media systems within social or historical processes, [but] ultimately put a premium on media as pure formal devices."[12] *Kentucky Route Zero* foregrounds the relationship between the electronic and the embodied lives of those who use it, considering how those users exist in a sociopolitical context that directly influences their relationships to technology. The game reveals that digital play has never been disembodied, as evidenced by the necessary audience interaction and experimental forms of the hypertextual. In this respect, the game engages with a body of contemporary critical theory in the digital humanities that attempts to emphasize the centrality of the embodied subject to digital evolution. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles builds on this work when she observes that "embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman" in a way that fundamentally misrepresents the centrality of the human body to epistemological perspectives, and that the tendency of the posthuman might be replaced by "a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being.[13] I argue that *Kentucky Route Zero* embarks on the same theoretical endeavor, albeit by utilizing its unique genre features as a computer game to demand the active participation of the game's player in this project.

Complementing its visual strangeness, *Kentucky Route Zero* incorporates numerous unconventional features of gameplay. Although players begin the game with Conway, their control expands as others join the troupe, introducing a fluidity of character perspectives that pushes back against a narrative rooted in singular subjective experience. Hayles considers how "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others' is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogenous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another," a phenomenon that the game's many characters and locations reinforce.[14] The linear progression of the game's narrative is interrupted not only by flashbacks detailing Conway's past, but by scenes narrated from the perspectives of nonplayable characters at undefined times in the future. Much of *Kentucky Route Zero* involves learning the stories of characters one encounters only in passing—hearing how each has a tangled and complex family history that is bound to the physical geography of Kentucky that the player is currently exploring. The game is also heavily indebted to magical realism as a genre. In the process of getting on the Zero, Conway encounters various strange figures, among them a trio of ghosts, the long-dead Weaver, a pair of cybernetic musicians, the operators of an underground lake's ferry, and a boy whose brother is a giant eagle. The game also includes a number of surreal locales that mirror the story's interest in the decline of social infrastructure in poor areas of America.[15] The uncanny spaces that the characters traverse function as channels through which *Kentucky Route Zero* broaches questions about the reuse, dilapidation, and decay of urban facilities in low-income areas, along with the displacement, lack of government funding, and loss of jobs to which such decay leads.

While accessing the Zero, Conway and his group enter a series of caves and encounter a party of academics led by a man named Donald in a sequence entitled "The Hall of the Mountain King." Accessed through another decaying structure—a bridge that has partially rotted away—this sequence brings to a head the game's interest in what comes after poststructural play in a digital era, its consequences and the further literary techniques that it might inspire. The caves are littered with technological debris, as "broken computers are placed precariously among the rocks" and "a pile of discarded electronics burns steadily in the center of the chamber," with this fire being the most visu-

ally pronounced element of the scene. In order to talk to the other characters in the sequence, Conway must move in a circle around this central fire, monument as it is to the broken machinery that becomes central to the scene in the form of the XANADU program that lies at the center of the academics' work.

The entire game, like the work of the academics, explores the question of "human-computer interaction" through the lens of the literary surreal, and the prominence of self-referential and metafictional themes in this sequence underlines that interest. XANADU, the broken computer, is named after Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and Donald, when approached, is humming a country tune that makes use of the words of the poem: "where the old green river runs, through hills and caves not known to us, down to that sunless sea." This passage, more than any other, stresses the game's investment in human-computer exchanges and how electronics can function as totems of human meaning.[16] However, as the academic group was creating the simulation—a hypertextual story that the XANADU computer functions as hardware for—Amy notes that her libidinal project had unintended results when translated into the game-within-a-game's hypertextual form. "We don't even have to add any new functionality," she admits; "the bugs just grow on their own."

The computer system, plagued by the mold that grows inside the cave, has overstretched the control of its creators. Unlike a conventional dystopian parable, the computer system of *Kentucky Route Zero* becomes more, not less, natural as it evolves beyond the scope of human manipulation. Donald notes that "it looks like a harmless old computer, doesn't it? Like some beat-up mainframe exhumed from a university basement and left in this cave to rot [. . .] or to flower! No, it's no ordinary computer. I've modified it extensively, and in some pretty *experimental* ways, believe you me!" After asking Shannon if she knows anything about "the effects of mold growth on diffused-based transistor circuitry," Donald explains that not all mold will destroy a computer completely, as some moldy filaments are more or less conductive than others, and it grows in non-linear, chaotic patterns. We can guide it a bit, through a simple application of classical horticulture, but we can't produce specific results, only *tendencies*. Thwarted and feeble, we hammer on this derelict keyboard: '*MY NAME IS REASON, KING OF KINGS!*' But we are mere gardeners in the ruins. Our keystrokes echo off into the tunnels [. . .] boundless and bare, the caves stretch far away.

The logic of mapping, conceptual and geographical, expressed here is again that of accidents: the strange, organic (and notably rhizomatic) encounters become an alternative to the efficient, profit-maximized grids of Consolidated Electric.[17] The "Ozymandias" variations of this sequence figure contemporary post-Enlightenment reason itself as the monument that will be undone as digital systems grow and subsequently change our relationship to the natural world. In this regard, *Kentucky Route Zero* offers a compelling inversion of commonsense wisdom that aligns the digital with reason and rationality. Its references to Romantic poets in this scene instead gesture to the possibility that the electronic will become more natural, where "natural" becomes shorthand for an uncontrollable sublime that evades the human determination that originally produced it. This sequence is also one of the game's most playful and self-referential. In describing XANADU, Donald tells Conway and the others that he published an academic article about the program's data structures entitled "Literary Multitudes: Hypertextual Narrative as Poststructural Witness." While this title is arguably a joke that the game directs at its own formal self-awareness and at the hypertext-game-within-a-hypertext-game that the player is about to experience, XANADU also gives the player a clue to the game's understanding of anxieties surrounding rampant deterioration and structural decay. Donald tells Shannon: "I'm afraid you are too late, fellow hypertext enthusiast. As the mold accumulated on the circuitry, XANADU blossomed for a moment into something holy and enchanted [. . .] then all the charm was broken. Do you have any idea what it's like to spend your life building something, and then to sit powerlessly as your work declines into ruin?" The player is provided with three separate responses to this, one for each of the other characters in the group (Conway, Shannon, and Ezra), all of whom have lives characterized by a significant loss or sense of deterioration. The game suggests, moreover, that this deterioration is the natural end result of the characters' various struggles with poverty, addiction, and lack of access to medical help and treatment, a prediction that will be fully realized when the player discovers that the mold destroying the XANADU computers has grown because it feeds on the ethanol fumes produced by the nearby Hard Times Distillery.

It is an attempt to repair the XANADU computer that leads Conway's party to the distillery. After the workers have offered advice and the group has returned to the caves, they activate XANADU, which proves to be a narrative-based hypertextual game that the characters themselves can play about the origins of the academic project and their first encounter with the "others":

the skeletal distillery men. Donald recalls, "There was so much more to it: ornate labyrinths of memory, exhaustively-simulated parallel cave ecosystems. Real artificial intelligence built on sophisticated neural network algorithms! [. . .] And then it began to crumble, when the strangers came." The strangers, the game reveals, are associated with the Consolidated Electric Company. As the story unfolds, Consolidated is revealed to be responsible for the decay of most of the social resources of the fictionalized Kentucky. Critics, including Stephen Fisher and Barbara Smith, have noted how Appalachian settings are consistently othered within American political discourse because of their associations with "poverty, joblessness, low wages, and other economic woes," which bear witness to the often-obscured consequences of "modernizing" projects that are driven by corporatized global capital on locales outside of the urban sphere.[18] Others, such as Dwight Billings and Ann E. Kingsolver, have identified the multiplicity of identities and political subjects that constitute Appalachian experience, pushing back on the idea of a single, easily definable Appalachia.[19] In addition to the work of Anne Shelby on Appalachian stereotypes, John Gaventa has observed how such "stereotypes—laziness, apathy, ignorance—could all serve, if internalized, as forms of powerlessness" that "protect the legitimacy of the status quo."[20] As a means of interrogating the economic histories of place that serve as the source of these stereotypes, *Kentucky Route Zero* devotes itself to finding power in the sharing of stories among characters from different parts of Appalachia.

The threat of structural decay looms large over the game's story: Conway meets Shannon at the entrance to an abandoned mine system called the Elkhorn, where Shannon is reading a plaque memorializing coal miners whose lives were lost in a structural accident. Shannon explains that her parents were former miners, and she recounts details about their low-wage work to Conway. "You know," she tells him as the two explore the mine together, "the miners used to have to pay just to run the fans and the lights? Yeah, they got paid in these shitty plastic tokens—coal scrip, you know? And if you want to run the fans for a bit to clear the air up, well, you have to put a token in." As they attempt to operate the PA system, Shannon further remarks that they will need to free up some of the power being used elsewhere, because "everything is rationed" in the mine.

The game's interest in Appalachian histories of coal mining activism responds to a broader focus on workers' rights that has been described by Fisher as characterizing media set in the area, a phenomenon also observed by Ben-

nett Judkins in his work on the Black Lung Association and Richard Cuoto's writing on the coal strikes of the 1980s.[21] Taking up the question of the health and physical impact of working (and living) conditions in Kentucky, the game emphasizes the personalized nature of such experiences by forcing the player to inhabit different characters, implicating them in the characters' actions and forcing them to acknowledge the narrowing of self-determinative choices that have been caused by histories of trauma and harm. *Kentucky Route Zero* thus considers how people understand their own fraught relationship with place, particularly when they have emotional attachments to a location that functions at once as both home and threat due to the intersections of global capital and poverty.

While *Kentucky Route Zero*'s Consolidated Electric is fictional, its presence invokes the history of real American entities such as the Consolidation Coal Company, the Duke Power Company, and Duke's subsidiary the Eastover Coal Company. Duke Power has a particularly notorious labor history, being the subject of the *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* case of 1971, in which the company was found to have used hiring practices (particularly employment tests) that unfairly discriminated against Black workers. Duke Power systematically excluded these workers from high-paying departments within the company in violation of the Civil Rights Act.[22] The company was also involved in the Brookside Mine Strike in Eastover, Kentucky, in 1973, which was featured in Barbara Kopple's documentary *Harlan County, USA* (1976). The documentary explicitly tackles the corporate practices that render the miners' bodies expendable, exploring black lung disease and its effects, the explosion of the Mannington Mine in West Virginia that trapped seventy-eight men underground, the violence directed toward the miners on the picket line by company-hired strike breakers carrying guns, and the poor housing conditions provided by the company for its employees, with the homes having no "water and no indoor plumbing."[23] Like its historical antecedents, Consolidated Electric appears to have a monopolistic control on the power operations of the region.

The logic of maximizing production efficiency that monetizes health itself and puts a premium on physical well-being and access to safe environments reveals spaces that have always been unsafe to those who live and work in them, even before their abandonment, with a rural world in a state of decay that is constant, albeit appearing in different forms at different times. The story of the miners foregrounds how health itself becomes commodified for those who

inhabit expendable bodies—or rather, bodies that have been deemed expendable by the corporate structures that function as powers-that-be. Needing to pay an additional cost to access healthier air and offset the environmental toxicity that they are inevitably exposed to in the course of their work, the miners become representative of the human cost involved when resources inherent to health and safety are understood through the conceptual frameworks of capitalist economics. As Hayles points out, the erasures of the bodily and the material from much posthuman rhetoric are not coincidental, but rather arise as the result of particular market conditions. She notes that the liberal self to which the posthuman responds "is produced by market relations and does not in fact predate them."[24]

Later in the Elkhorn sequence, the game reveals that Shannon's parents were killed when the mine became flooded, with Shannon noting: "The water came in pretty fast, and a lot of folks got trapped in the tunnels. I only heard parts of how it went from there—sanitized for the bereaved [. . .] you know how these big companies are. But there was gossip too. The trapped miners couldn't get the pumps going because the power was rationed, so they shut all the lights off. But even then it wasn't enough." These deaths are a direct result of rationing practices that typify the conditions of manufactured scarcity in the service of corporate profit that the miners work under, and the sequence as a whole thus forecasts the game's later revelation that the electric company is complicit in perpetuating the region's widespread debt and alcoholism through its influence with the Hard Times Distillery.[25] Even as the Elkhorn Mine is a site of tremendous loss of life and historical injustice, it is also home to old electronics and curios left behind by the miners after their deaths. The game invests these items with importance as markers of humanity, even in a rotted or dilapidated state. The miners took the trinkets offered by the company that they worked for and nonetheless used them to make markers of meaning and humanity. While the game is clearly interested in the practical details of the precarious lives of its subjects, it uses its supernatural features to further dramatize experiences of poverty and class, most notably by elevating the problem of debt—a condition that seems unavoidable for most of the game's characters, given how the social structures in which they live perpetuate it—to the stakes of a Faustian bargain. "If you want to die with any dignity, you've got to settle up," says one character who has already become part of the distillery's skeletal machinery. Shannon raises the problem early in Act I of the game, as the first thing she recalls when she and Conway enter Weaver's

old house is the fact that her parents "took out a bunch of loans [to have] the place built." After asking Conway whether he has any debts, Shannon confides in him that her own parents attempted to avoid debt "until the company store found a way to get to them. For my dad it was tokens to run the fans and air purifiers, and for my mom it was canaries. Two solutions to the same problem," notably mechanical and organic solutions that serve a similar function. "Weaver had debt, too—a lot of it. All tuition." If Conway responds by asking how Weaver paid off her student loans, Shannon will tell him that "she didn't. She had no income, none of them did."

Kentucky Route Zero shows, rather than tells, the player how the problem of living under debt is perpetuated by a network of social problems—dangerous infrastructure and working conditions, a lack of health insurance, low wages, addiction as a makeshift coping mechanism—that create a cycle in which escaping precarity becomes nearly impossible. When all of these problems are interconnected, as the game shows them to be, they create a fatal system that the game mirrors in its central narrative and geography. The mold that is destroying the XANADU computer feeds on the ethanol fumes of a whiskey that is produced by the skeletons who work in the underground distillery. These skeletons are people who, in their lives, went into debt, and the skeleton Doolittle ties the exploitative work programs of the distillery to the electric company when he hints at the need for having a "Consolidated Plan" in order for a worker to pay off the debt that he has accrued. This phrasing suggests a conspiracy-like relationship between the distillery, whose working conditions seem purposefully to mirror those of the dead miners from decades prior, and the Consolidated Power Company.

The first hint to the distillery as a threatening technological presence in the game comes in an early sequence when Conway and Shannon meet Johnny and Junebug, cyborg musicians who have literally created themselves after having been produced as blank canvases to work as mechanical miners by Consolidated. Donna Haraway has, like Hayles, foregrounded the role of the body, and its various transformations, in an age of new technological sovereignty, observing that "by the late twentieth century, [. . .] we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs."[26] Although the cyborg is a psychological and existential state in addition to being a bodily one, much of Haraway's theorizing about it is predicated on the new fluidity of physical reality and her project aligns with that of

Hayles insofar as both are invested in the question of how technological use is rooted in the specificity of diverse bodily experiences.

Conway ends up working for the distillery because of his own alcoholism.[27] After injuring his leg in an accident with Shannon, they visit the mysterious Dr. Truman, who gives Conway the experimental drug *Neurypnol TM*, in a sequence that invokes the early twenty-first century's opioid epidemic with its possible origins in the availability of pain medication.[28] Truman waits until Conway is drowsy from the drug to talk about billing him for the procedure: the dialogue box becomes blurry and difficult for the viewer to read, but it is legible enough to show Dr. Truman saying that "the pharmaceutical company [he is] contracted with was recently acquired by an energy company," Consolidated Electric. Later, Truman will inform Conway that all of his medical payments "run through [his] electricity bill now. You can pay it all back in full on your next billing cycle, or you can get on an energy credit payment plan. You'd have to call Consolidated for more detail about that. [. . .] Something about generating electricity to send back into the grid." The interrelated structures of poverty, health care, and physical local infrastructure form a system in which the individual is subordinated to the efficiency of profit-making. The image of the grid here gestures to the organizations of power that underlie the cyclical, self-perpetuating structures of precarity that have characterized the region's long history as internal "colony" available for corporate exploit.

The game is keenly aware of the enormous cost of being poor in America. The doctor and the distillery both underscore the way that payment plans often take advantage of the working poor, or those who need a short-term infusion of liquid capital, in order to then charge them premiums, with the long-term result of keeping them in a state of economic precarity. When Conway and Shannon discuss the procedure later, Shannon, who comes from a family of Colombian immigrants, notes:

> We almost never had a regular doctor, or health insurance, or anything like that. Our immigration stuff was a mess for most of my childhood, so we only qualified for state programs in small patches before something or other would get contested. [. . .] If a cut got infected or her migraines were too much to handle, mom would talk to so-and-so who knew so-and-so— usually another miner—and end up with some pills. And instead of medical advice, every pill came with gossipy anecdotal warnings and superstitions.

These anecdotes about the sharing of medication and medical help, and the risks involved, highlight those whose lives in America are marked by a reliance on stopgap measures for health and safety and a dependency on casual familial and communal exchanges as a proxy for legitimate medical care. Shannon's recounting of her adolescent experiences highlights how such measures themselves take on a quality of folklore, with medication being passed along with family stories.

Before their encounter with Dr. Truman, Conway and Shannon visit the chapel that was relocated to a storage facility in search of information and Conway meets a caretaker named Brandon. Upon seeing Conway's injury, Brandon says, "I bet everyone's telling you to go see a doctor. Hey, I get it: too expensive. My dad cut his arm pretty bad on a job, but he stitched himself back up because we didn't have health insurance. But then his hand didn't work very well, and he got pretty depressed, and eventually he just sort of . . ." What remains unsaid in Brandon's elliptical trailing off sums up the position in which many of the game's characters find themselves—the precarity of living in poverty and coping with the ripple effects of intergenerational trauma involved perpetuates itself in subtle yet incessant ways. Having partial or unreliable access to health care, as the game stresses, can become a contributing factor for substance abuse, mental illnesses that are exacerbated by financial and medical stress, the necessity of low-wage, physically or mentally demanding jobs like mining, and a lack of access to meaningful government aid. This complex of social problems, whose many interconnecting nodes the game examines, forms its own highway-like network of desperation that leads to living people going without. With their lives characterized by a restriction of choices for maintaining their own survival, the game's own hypertextual form mimics such confinement's strategic closing of certain narrative choices. Moreover, *Kentucky Route Zero* reveals itself to be deeply invested in how this restriction of access to basic human rights spurs the formation of local community networks, in which one must rely for help on other people in similar situations due to the lack of overarching structural options.

Neurypnol has a number of strange side effects, and when Conway wakes after a short flashback sequence, the player sees that his leg has become skeletal and has taken on a strange, yellow glow, but none of the game's other characters seem aware of this change. Additional context clues suggest that only the viewer and Conway are able to see the distillery workers of Act III as the skeletons that they are. Other characters refer to them as "the others" and

as "creepy distillery guys," and during their attempt to repair the XANADU computer, Conway and Shannon find the Hard Times Whiskey Distillery underneath a decrepit church. Doolittle the skeleton explains as part of a tour of the facilities that the workers are there to pay off the debts they've accrued according to a formula designed by Weaver prior to her death. The skeleton offers Conway a job and then a drink to celebrate his hiring. Conway, who drinks the whiskey before he can refuse the job offer, puts himself in debt to the distillery workers such that he must take the job to pay them off.

Kentucky Route Zero's supernatural features thus allow the game to examine the self-alienation inherent in addiction and alcoholism, with Conway's slow transformation making him a stranger to himself.[29] The visual elements and magical plot represent the emotional sensations involved in the experience of dealing with addiction—the actual subjective experiences of being subject to its deferred but inescapable consequences—in a way that is largely unavailable to the traditional codex and allows the viewer to share in the emotional stakes of the sequence. One of the rare moments in the game when the player's choice is restricted in service to plot is when Doolittle offers Conway the whiskey. Conway has to take the drink; the player is given no other choice for the progression of the story and thus shares in the sense of inevitability and Conway's culpability when the stakes of the drink are revealed.

Work, for the characters of the game, becomes a site of deep ambivalence, simultaneously representative of the exploitative conditions that cause direct bodily harm to workers but also a means by which structure and a sense of self can be established. In using Conway's last delivery for the antiques business as a narrative framework, the game examines the loss of sense of self that accompanies the loss of a job, especially for workers growing older who struggle with addictions or are part of the working poor.

Kentucky Route Zero is thus a game deeply invested in the post-technological. Countering beliefs in technology as redemptive and democratizing, it asks instead how problems of poverty and structural deterioration continue, albeit in new—and, at times, more insidious—forms, while not foreclosing the possibility that the digital, like the buildings that cycle through the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, might be redeemed through the uniquely human meaning with which its users can imbue it. In Act IV, Poppy, a switchboard operator at Echo River Central Exchange, tells Shannon: "The power company came along, buying up all the lines, and one day they took the exchange as a throw-in, like it was nothing. Nothing! And they started phasing us out.

[. . .] After a few months, it was just me. A new automation strategy was announced, and this place was re-christened, 'Consolidated Auxiliary Switch Number 30.'" Shannon can respond by asking what Poppy does, given the new automation system, and Poppy responds that

it's not *fully* automated. There are still gaps in functionality that need a human touch. [. . .] And, you know, it really is all about *touch*, here. Sound is a vibration, a touch you feel in your ear, so my voice is my touch. When we're talking, we're touching, even on the phone—that's an electrical touch, an intimate little shock. [. . .] So, short of replacing the whole thing, not to mention all the wiring, they'd have to work out the exact timing of every little human gesture that goes into routing a phone call.

In underscoring the ability to respond to "human gesture[s]" as a uniquely human quality in itself, *Kentucky Route Zero* poses the question of what humanity consists of in an age of widespread digitization, suggesting the inability of automated systems to do away entirely with human components, regardless of how deeply these aspects might be hidden. When Poppy later entertains what she considers "a dark thought"—"What if there is no cheap machine that's going to replace me? What if it's cheaper just to keep me here, filling in for the rhythm of the operators. [. . .] What if *I'm* the cheap machine?"—she manages to reassure herself by thinking that she is "keeping some part of [the Central Exchange] human."

The fifth and final act of *Kentucky Route Zero* reveals that the unnamed, flooded town in which 5 Dogwood Drive is located was once a settlement for power plant employees that had been developed by "the power company," presumably Consolidated Electric. The game tells us that the houses the company built were "rotten" and are now uninhabitable. Similarly, it failed to build a promised drainage ditch, which has led to worse damage from the flooding and the death of two horses. "When the plant shut down," we learn, "the company abruptly pulled out of the area and took a large part of the town's population with it," leaving the area in the care of its remaining residents. Near the end of the game, a town resident offers one reason why the power plant may have failed: a solidarity of workers in response to mistreatment. The resident tells the travelers, "You and our other visitors might not know about the Out-of-Towner. He came here to work for the company, to dig a ditch. And the company worked him good and hard, and for less than he was worth, but

it wasn't enough. They had to use him up completely. After that, we became ungovernable. First out of shame, then grief, then anger."

Populated now by both living characters and singing ghosts (who share their memories of the town's earlier years with the player), the town is being investigated by the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces for possible repossession, a process that would presumably corporatize the space and evict its remaining inhabitants. The game also suggests that some of the ghosts are from a period that predates the company homes: the horses who live in the area are from "generations ago," and they "came with the people from Central America [who settled in the region]. You know, the utopians—the 'People of Nothing.'" Many of the playable characters from Acts II through IV decide to stay at Dogwood Drive and attempt to preserve the town, even as the place's other inhabitants prepare to leave.

The interactivity of *Kentucky Route Zero* as a game forces the player to take an active role in the narrative, emphasizing the need for individual responsibility and regrounding in an era of corporate personhood. *Kentucky Route Zero* exemplifies the uniqueness of video games as a genre for exploring social responsibility, and the obligations that we have toward our local communities. Though it draws on the stylistic features of novels and films, the game's ability to collate the aesthetic qualities of its formal precursors with the ability to experience direct responsibility for a controlled character by choosing their behavior foregrounds the player's role as active co-creator of the story and allows the players to experience themselves as members of the game's local relationships in Appalachia. While the Consolidated Electric Company is an intangible, shadowy organization, the game forces players as human beings to recognize the stakes of—and take responsibility for—the lives that they encounter, an experience that the game suggests is fundamental to any preservation of meaningful personhood in an era of widespread digitization.

NOTES

1. *Kentucky Route Zero*, v. 22 (Cardboard Computer, 2020).

2. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*.

3. Literary and cinematic references abound in *Kentucky Route Zero*: the Marquez family, living at 100 Macondo Lane, functions with its Aunt Remedios as an homage to Latin American writer Gabriel García Márquez, and cousins Shannon and Weaver recall the theorists central to the creation of the integrated circuit and to communication studies more

broadly. One company featured in the game is "Laszlo Electronics," recalling the Jamf of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. One of Cardboard Computer's intermissions for the game, *The Entertainment*, is a mock play about alcohol addiction whose authorship is attributed to Lem Doolittle, a character who appears in later acts of *Kentucky Route Zero* as a skeletal distillery worker, which suggests the infamous paralyzing media central to the plot of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. One of the workers at the underground telephone exchange is named Dashiell Morse, in a nod to Dashiell Hammett, who is the author of *The Maltese Falcon*. Another sequence, entitled "In Bedquilt," evokes Dorothy Canfield. Conversations between the two cyborg musicians, named Johnny and Junebug after the Cashes, feature lines lifted from the plays of Beckett and the lyrics of Christian hymns. The game's references thus form an amalgamation of American cultural references together with postmodern and avant-garde media: it is deeply interested not only in the experimental textual structures that have inspired hypertextual traditions, but also in those that inform American culture more broadly. Having characters mimic lines from American texts with a reputation for being canonical and foundational—one makes reference to Whitman's "very well then, I contradict myself"—legitimizes an area of economic and structural scarcity, often caricatured as cut off from forms of high art in spite of its well-established literary and cultural history.

4. The game's hypertextual nature makes exact citations difficult—while some sequences are tied to specific acts, others appear at differing periods based on the player's choices, such that they can avoid certain areas entirely.

5. Marks, "*Kentucky Route Zero* Review"; Plante, "Why *Kentucky Route Zero* Is the Most Important Game of the Decade."

6. Joyce, *afternoon, a story*.

7. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 35, 123; Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 3.

8. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 19, 50; in an interview for the now-defunct *Venus Patrol* website, game artist Tamas Kemenczy offers a brief catalogue of films that inspired his techniques of visual experimentalism, among them the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, and the film art of Steina and Woody Vasulka. He points specifically to the "Scan Processor Studies" videos created by Woody Vasulka and Brian O'Reilly, citing the ability of their "deflecting cathode rays to make strange landscapes. They share a family resemblance to the Zero, and they are partly responsible for the tone of it and other map modes in KRZ." Boyer, "*Venus Patrol* Presents: The Kentucky Route Zero Guide to Film."

9. "COPY < IT > RIGHT!"

10. Morton, "NOTES ON THE AESTHETIC OF 'copying-an-Image Processor.'"

11. Christine Tamblyn notes that "Sandin eschewed the hierarchical organizational mode favored by television engineers that places all components under the control of one centralized unit. The unlabeled modules that comprise Sandin's machine can be connected incrementally to attain unpredictable and unprecedented results. Thus it is possible for users to devise their own personalized approach to operating the Image Processor and to develop unique, readily identifiable styles." Tamblyn, "Image Processing in Chicago Video Art, 1970–1980," 304.

12. Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 5.

13. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3–4.

14. Ibid.

15. The Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces is responsible for taking the property of former institutions and repurposing them for use in other industries, transforming a hospital into the site of an auto dealership and a distillery into a graveyard. One scene involves the troupe of playable characters visiting a Museum of Dwellings, which showcases a number of homes and living spaces, still inhabited, collected in one large warehouse. A climactic moment in the game takes place at an old telephone exchange underground, accessed through a series of caves that serve as a bat sanctuary, and another in a chapel that has been relocated—via the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces—to an old storage facility, where it continues to hold services in the absence of a congregation.

16. One academic named Amy tells the group that before working with the academics, doing debugging for their computer system, she used to write romance novels. She tells them how "suddenly it was all computers everywhere you went. I thought I might be able to do something with that. Inject a little libido into those ugly beige boxes."

17. See also Burnett, "Mold on the Cornbread," 162–165.

18. Fisher and Smith, "Introduction: Placing Appalachia," 2.

19. Billings and Kingsolver, eds., *Appalachia in Regional Context*.

20. Shelby, "The 'R' Word,," 153–60; Gaventa, "The Power of Place and the Place of Power," 91–110.

21. Judkins, "The People's Respirator," 225; Cuoto, "The Memory of Miners and the Conscience of Capital," 165–94; Fisher, "The Grass Roots Speak Back," 203–14.

22. Smith, *Race, Labor, and Civil Rights*, 1–2.

23. Kopple, *Harlan County, USA*.

24. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

25. During this scene, the player can choose to turn off the light on the mine cart that Conway and Shannon are riding and witness the ghosts of the dead miners walking through the cave. The cave's ghosts indicate that these problems—low-wage jobs, the absence of worker's rights and access to medical care, mental illness—have, much like the Zero itself, a cyclical and self-perpetuating structure: the hard times of the past do not stay dead, but necessarily reappear and re-assert themselves in the present.

26. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

27. The *Kentucky Route Zero* intermission *The Entertainment* is set in a bar in the same universe as the game and examines more thoroughly the vicious cycles involved in alcoholism: addiction is subject to the self-perpetuating logic described above, in which characters living in economic precarity cope through a reliance on substances for which they will go deeper in debt.

28. Moody, Satterwhite, and Bickel, "Substance Use in Rural Central Appalachia."

29. As the game continues, Conway becomes progressively more skeletal, with his right arm following his left leg in appearance, and then, during a sequence with Shannon at the Echo River telephone exchange, his entire body has become a skeleton and other distillery workers come by in a boat to take him underground.

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