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A Reckoning: Performance, Notation, and Memory in *Kentucky Route Zero*

Kentucky Route Zero, developed by Cardboard Computer and released in five parts between 2013 and 2020, spends a lot of time on stage. Whether we are watching an experimental play, or a requiem for horse friends, or a synth-pop ballad raising the roof of a bar, the performing arts define many of the game's most resonant moments. The first performance we see in *Kentucky Route Zero* appears in an interlude called "The Entertainment." The title comes from a student production of fictional playwright Lem Doolittle's plays "A Bar Fly" and "A Reckoning," amalgamated into one performance. Of this, fictional journalist Lily Thurston remarked, "How unexpected ... to encounter a production that treats the script so irreverently! The student company has gone so far as to change the title of the play, and even add a new character ... Still, this staging of 'The Entertainment' stays true to the heart of Doolittle's work." Thurston's comment, precluding Act III of the game, sets up the developers' framing of performance and interpretation within the digital medium of a video game.

Kentucky Route Zero (abbreviated henceforth as *KRZ*) shapes itself by player choice. Players can select lines of character dialogue to decide who speaks and how they respond to their world or the events of the game. These choices, however, have no impact on the storyline itself: they are only stylistic judgments of, for example, what feels most in-character for protagonist Conway or how much backstory we want to hear from deuteragonist Sharon. The structure of the game resembles—but is not exactly—that of seminal electronic literature genres of hypertext and interactive fiction, outlined by Nick Montfort in *Twisty Little Passages* (2003). Montfort

introduces the idea of a “session text” as the transcript of a player’s interaction with an interactive fiction program (Montfort 24), which I am interested in examining in *KRZ*.



Fig. 1. Example of dialogue tree interface in *Kentucky Route Zero*

Montfort exemplifies the concept of session text using the transcript of a *Zork* session, noting that the session text includes the text generated by the program, the program’s instructions to the player, and the raw input strings from the player. In the session text of *Zork*, the distinction between input and interface is obvious, as the player’s input is preceded by the “>” character and immediately followed by the program’s response on the following line. It is clear which excerpts are notes to the player (“I don’t know the word ‘how’”) and which are part of the narrative (“Opening the mailbox reveals a leaflet”). However, in *KRZ*, all session text is diegetic: there are no textual instructions, only visual interface cues and UX conventions that indicate interaction. The default font of the game is white, but the appearance of three lines in yellow text indicate a “dialogue tree” where a choice must be made (see Fig. 1). The text changes color on hover and then fades to the default white after the player makes their selection. The unselected options then

disappear, erased from the session text entirely. Montfort describes interactive fictions as “potential narratives” (Montfort 26), paralleling the game’s description of Lem Doolittle’s works as “living script.” Each characters’ lines animate letter-by-letter on screen, giving the impression that we are watching an incomplete manuscript write itself in real time.

KRZ’s session text is divided into acts and scenes, with monospace font and dialogue lines preceded by a capitalized character name and colon to indicate who is speaking. This style imitates that of a playscript, prompting a reading of *KRZ*’s session text as the script for a performance. Observing this I sought a theoretical foundation to define the script of a play. In *Languages of Art* (1968), Nelson Goodman distinguishes between “score” and “script” in that “score” is a piece of notation adhering to an unambiguous syntactic system whereas “script” is a piece of notation that allows for more subjectivity and interpretation (Goodman 199). Goodman writes that the script of a play is both score and script combined, where the dialogue is the score and the stage directions are the script. The dialogue is traditionally meant to be faithfully re-enacted whereas the stage directions require interpretation from production to production. But interpreting *KRZ*’s session text as playscript challenges Goodman’s entire framework due to its video game format: the session text of the game is different with each playthrough, whereas the set design—part of the stage direction—remains static, using the same music, 3D models, textures, and other audiovisual assets with each play.

Goodman insists that because the score of a work is unambiguous, a performance must comply completely with the score to be a “genuine instance” of the work (Goodman 186). The most brilliant performance of Rachmaninoff’s *Concerto No.2* would be a completely different work if the pianist made one mistake. But what does this mean for *KRZ*, where no playthrough complies to an identical score, yet the plot remains more-or-less the same? Statistically, it is near

impossible for two random playthroughs of *KRZ* to produce identical session text—and playthroughs are not random. A player’s navigation of the game is shaped by their own lived experience, and for no two sessions is this exactly the same. Even players replaying the game bring their knowledge of their first playthrough. The personal context that the player brings to the session is as crucial to the experience as the text itself. Be it lived experience with *KRZ*’s socioeconomic themes, historical understanding of the game’s e-literary precedents, or an evolving relationship with the game over its seven-year release schedule, this personal context shapes the player’s sensory perception of the game in a way that isn’t inscribed in the score yet is the foundation of the game’s Benjaminian “aura.”

While Goodman discusses the authenticity of an unmediated performance—a live work that can never be perfectly re-enacted after it is complete—Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* responds to the emergence of instantaneously reproducible mediums such as film and photography. Naturally, their takes on “authenticity” collide. As a game influenced by both live theater and media technologies, *KRZ* reflects the tension between their two arguments, best exemplified by the live performances represented within the game. In Act III, Junebug performs “Too Late To Love You” in the Hard Times Distillery, and as players we can choose the lyrics she sings. If the session text until this point embodied a manuscript on paper, it now embodies a live performance.



Fig. 2. Screenshot of Junebug's performance in Kentucky Route Zero.

Recall that up until this point, text animates on screen as if being typed in front of us. But when Junebug sings, entire stanzas of italicized text appear at once, giving players a preview of the forthcoming lyrics. The font itself is even more stylized, with decorative serifs. Words turn green when Junebug sings them, indicating her position in the song like the typography of a sing-along karaoke video (see Fig. 2). As with the rest of the game, players can choose the song's lyrics, but the chorus, title, melody, instrumentals, and overall impression of the song remain the same. Listening to the "canonical" version of the song released as part of *KRZ*'s soundtrack does not create a dramatically different ambiance from the variation I generated in my playthrough: the essence is the same. Previously in the game, Ezra asks Shannon what they're singing about on TV. Shannon has the choice between telling him *travel*, *going home*, and *hard times*, but the mood of the song complies with any interpretation. Perhaps the interactivity in Junebug's scene, then, simulates interpretation and memory recall rather than lyrical composition. Junebug mentions before taking the stage that "Too Late To Love You" is her interpretation of another

performance that “stuck with [her].” In this scene, do we play as the audience, selecting the lyrics most memorable to our interpretation? Or do we play as Junebug, recalling the lyrics from our own memory and improvising our cover of the song?

That Junebug herself is an android brings us back to the idea of mechanical reproduction: what does it mean for a machine to “remember”? As a piece of magical realism, *KRZ* doesn’t go into the technicalities of Junebug’s memory storage, but the idea of recording recurs throughout the story: Lula’s installation art, Xanadu’s transcriptions, Will’s voicemails, even *KRZ*’s “save slots” are represented by a notebook, a video tape, and an audio tape. Instead of “save” and “cancel,” the options menu to configure *KRZ*’s settings presents us with the options “remember” and “forget.” But the computer cannot truly forget—physically, every interaction leaves an electromagnetic imprint on its hardware—so it performs forgetting. The piece of software that is *KRZ* creates a score for the performance of memory: installing the game provides each user with an identical package of C# scripts, MP3s, font files, and FBX models that the computer interprets without ambiguity. These hard-coded elements form the notation for the computer game.

Notation exists because memory is unreliable. But in the age of mechanical reproduction, why learn to read sheet music notation when you can watch a tutorial on YouTube? In the age of digital media, the developers of *KRZ* could have chosen to create a photorealistic performance that plays out the same each time, taking full advantage of 2010s computer graphics. Instead, they decided to communicate the story through primarily text, to render their characters low-poly and faceless like our view of the actors from the theater’s back row. By designing around live performance, the creators of *Kentucky Route Zero* exemplify how a medium as structured as a programmed system can simulate something as ephemeral as live theater and as malleable as human memory.

Works Cited

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