

“I OWE SOME PEOPLE SOME APOLOGIES”: THE CULTURE OF DEBT AND DIGITAL MEDIA IN *KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO*

“Eu devo desculpas para algumas pessoas”: A cultura da dívida e mídias digitais em *Kentucky Route Zero*

“Solo algunas disculpas a ciertas personas”: La cultura de la deuda y de medios digitales en *Kentucky Route Zero*

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Abstract: Videogames are a large and growing cultural-economic medium, a fact alone that makes them worthy of critical attention. Focalising one text, *Kentucky Route Zero* (CARDBOARD COMPUTER 2013-2020) hereafter referred to as KRZ, this essay argues that videogame media functions as a unique and powerful tool for navigating the phenomenological experiences of neoliberal capitalism and its principal mode of expression -- debt. We argue that KRZ functions as an exemplar of the ways in which games respond to and mediate social and economic structures in terms of content, design, narrative and production. We delve into the game in full, parsing through it, its approaches of economic insecurity, hauntology, debt and how a single text can portray and be part of a wide cultural and economic moment.

Keywords: Kentucky Route Zero. Videogames. Debt. Digital media. Culture studies.

Resumo: Videogames são uma mídia econômico-cultural ampla e crescente, um fato que os torna dignos de atenção crítica. Enfocando um texto, *Kentucky Route Zero* (CARDBOARD COMPUTER 2013-2020) referido em diante como KRZ, esse artigo argumenta que videogames funcionam como uma poderosa e singular ferramenta para navegar as experiências fenomenológicas do capitalismo neoliberal e seu principal modo de expressão – dívida. Argumentamos que KRZ funciona exemplarmente das formas em que jogos eletrônicos respondem a, e intermediam estruturas econômicas e sociais em termos de conteúdo, design, narrativa e produção. Assim, investigamos o jogo por inteiro, analisando-o, suas abordagens de insegurança econômica, assombrologia, dívida e como um único texto pode representar e fazer parte de um largo período cultural e econômico.

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Palavras-chave: Kentucky Route Zero. Videogames. Dívida. Mídias digitais. Estudos culturais.

Resumen: Videogames son un medio económico-cultural largo y en crecimiento, algo que os hace digno de atención crítica. Concentrando un texto, *Kentucky Route Zero* (CARDBOARD COMPUTER 2013-2020) referido como KRZ en adelante, este ensayo argumenta que los videojuegos operan como una poderosa y única herramienta para navegar las experiencias fenomenológicas del capitalismo neoliberal y su principal modo de expresión – deuda. Nosotros discutimos que KRZ es ejemplar de las formas como juegos electrónicos responden y median estructuras económicas y sociales en términos de contenido, design, narrativa y producción. Así, investigamos el juego como un todo, analizándolo, sus abordajes de inseguridad económica, hauntología, deuda y cómo un único texto puede representar y hacer parte de un largo período cultural y económico.

Palabras-clave: *Kentucky Route Zero*. Videojuegos. Deuda. Medios digitales. Estudios culturales.

Introduction

Videogames are a large and growing cultural-economic medium, a fact alone that makes them worthy of critical attention. Focussing one text, *Kentucky Route Zero* (CARDBOARD COMPUTER 2013-2020) hereafter referred to as KRZ, this essay argues that videogame media functions as a unique and powerful tool for navigating the phenomenological experiences of neoliberal capitalism and its principal mode of expression – debt. Developed by the three-person company known as Cardboard Computer and financed through the website Kickstarter, it was released in an episodic five act structure over the course of 2013-2020. The point-and-click adventure game presents the strange, magical, and tragic stories involving an antiques' delivery in an unknown address in rural Kentucky. We argue that KRZ functions as an exemplar of the ways in which games respond to and mediate social and economic structures in terms of content, design, narrative and production – in this case the economic and social totality exemplified in the construct of debt as both social reality for working class people, and as a necessary and essential part of the wider capitalist creative economy in which gaming is developed and produced.

In order to navigate this mixed approach of economic theory and cultural politics, we bring together the question of how capitalism can be theorised in modernity, and how it has come to be represented in cultural objects, namely KRZ's relationship to, and treatment of capitalism and debt. To do so, we will take an exploratory approach to the text, bringing forth its narrative, characters, dialogue and structure, in order to fully draw out the relationship between this videogame and the cultural and political conditions it engages with. To uphold

that approach, we are connected to three theoretical frameworks that we shall bring up as they become relevant and convenient as we navigate the game and its structure.

First, the broad turn towards the cultural critique of political economy that emerged in the post-2008 era – this is specifically grounded in the theoretical analyses of Mark Fisher and David Harvey in their investigation of “fictitious capital”, a form of speculative capital that is unmoored from the constraints of the so-called real world, yet nevertheless has a profound impact upon it. In particular, we approach how space and land are treated in the game. Characters' homes are (re)possessed and families are dispossessed by the speculative and spectral forces of capitalism entirely mediated through structures of debt and rent extraction rather than production. Debt is the mediating metaphor of KRZ and in this, the game shares something fundamental to the social conditions of the society in which it was produced.

Second, we borrow from the works of Annie McClanahan and Maurizio Lazzarato, (scholarship is its own kind of debt, an irony of which we, as precarious scholars, are deeply aware). These thinkers are paradigmatic of critical approaches that see debt as something greater than a simple economic category, reshaping subjectivity and social relationships. Lazzarato's work on the “indebted man”, presents a new figure, an essential condition, under neoliberalism. Debt is, as one of Lazzarato's chapters is titled, the essential condition of social life in late capitalist modernity (LAZZARATO, 2012, p. 13). Debt is the great leveller of all people under capitalism: as any and all social relationships are mediated with and under debt. His work is then paired with McClanahan's, which allows for an exploration of debt as a cultural phenomena in its representation especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. These authors present us with a groundwork for the functioning of debt under the current conditions.

Third, there is a direct connection with works that engage with KRZ, and that look at it as both a videogame and digital text object for analysis. Noteworthy examples are the work of game scholar and historian Aubrey Anable, as she identifies how the game creates relations of affect to its players and the games own relationship to the history of the medium, (a point to which we will return to further ahead). Alongside the work of indie game developer Scott Benson as equally crucial here, as he engages with the personal and the political brought forth by KRZ, reinforcing the significance and the power of it as a game, and connecting KRZ to the wider cultural zeitgeist of post-2008 recession cultural production.

Significant too is the particular relationship that KRZ has with neoliberalism, beyond being a project that portrays the effects of the 2008 crisis. The game exemplifies the resurgence of old notions of patronage, and the current phenomena of the privatisation of art, after all, the game was crowdfunded over Kickstarter and developed over the course of 9 years, an unusual approach for a video game release. However, this is brought up not to reduce the game to the context of its creation, but to bring together the external production into the interpretation of the internal structures of the text. Both internal and external factors transform each other, as the real-world circumstances that surround KRZ are reframed by it: a continued and dialectical act of interpretation, which we intend to highlight and develop further.

The approach we take in following the thread and reality of debt in KRZ is to explore the game, in the order it is played, modelling this text upon the game's very structure, narrating and connecting the elements of the gameplay with the theory we indicated. It should also be noted that the entire game's text, with its diverse textual choices and options, is fully available online at [«https://consolidatedpower.co/~eli/»](https://consolidatedpower.co/~eli/). However, as neither in-game nor outside of it there are any kind of page numbers, all references to the game will indicate the Act, Scene, and in-website text-string (when available) that can be directly located in the individual Acts and Intermissions webpages.

This format and structure of the article follows the outline of the game, functioning as a way to develop not only the relationships the game presents, but also to make the game central to the very form of our text, all the while bringing together the cultural and economic histories that the game recreates, records, and brings to the fore. Much like KRZ has an explicit five-act structure with significant intermissions and an epilogue, so will this article. Ultimately, to work with and explore KRZ we cannot remain distant, but must allow ourselves to dive into and with the game, as both scholars and people living in the neoliberal capitalism thus portrayed.

Act One

KRZ begins with a simple and almost universal narrative structure – it starts with just a man and a dog. Conway is an ageing truck driver making his last delivery for Lysette's Antiques, the business he's been a part of for many years. Pulling into a gas station, Conway meets an elderly dog - the name of which is entirely up to the player – and this dog will be a

companion through most of the game to come. As Conway parks at a gas station to refuel and ask for directions we get an introduction to how the game handles interactivity, and the nature of agency the player can exercise throughout the course of the game.

Crucially, contemporary games media are predicated on an external sense of agency - players are supposed to be allowed to play a game their own way, with game design focusing on creating a broad array of choices and possibilities in which players can operate (From Software's immensely popular game *Elden Ring* has explored this notion of player agency as creating a mediating and satisfying "friction" for players when combined with the game's hard difficulty). However, the model of agency proposed by KRZ is radically different to a contemporary game design understanding of player agency. The game is heavily text based (harking back to a more antiquated and historical mode of narrative gaming) and the player can decide what Conway – and frequently what other characters – can say in certain circumstances. In this first moment, the gas station attendant, Joseph, asks Conway about the dog, to which the player can name them and ascribe them a gender, and a name. The player can call the dog Homer or Blue, or to leave it nameless. There is no choice to *not* take the dog or to leave them behind, rather, what the game offers is a choice in terms of affect and emotional investment. There is no freedom to refuse the narrative the game proposes -- but we as players do get the freedom to decide the emotional tonality of our experience. In a sense, this limited agency is "bad" game design, but it serves an important ideological and philosophical point. When read in conjunction with the explicit themes of the games' text, this choice is not simply a structural or formal limitation but a powerful means by which the game underscores its narrative through mechanical game design. The game is about the ways in which the structures of debt constraint and limit individual agency – in a world of capitalist exploitation we do not have the luxury of player freedom. So many do not choose the conditions of their work, or where they live but have these choices limited and made for them by structural forces. The structures of capitalism operate without our giving assent to them, but we can choose how we relate to this lack of external freedom. Despite everything, the game suggests, we retain an internal and subjective space for emotional response and from that seemingly insubstantial and immaterial ground of the psyche we can find new modes of sociality that thrive within the wider forces which constrain human behaviour.

Aside from the conversations between characters the remaining interactivity in the game is an old-fashioned quest narrative. At first the game focalizes Conway, trying to make

his way to the address, 5 Dogwood Drive. The player objective for the early acts of the game revolves around finding people who might help Conway, and doing something for these people. Additionally, players can walk around, look at the ephemera of the world, speak with others and explore – simply because they can. This attitude of wandering not only reflects the fundamental condition of the characters but is something the game encourages, connecting the game again to a longer more literary tradition – that of the flaneur. Graphically it is basic and deliberately lo-fi, but textually the game presents itself as a hyper-text, in which every object, location or person has a rich body of detail, that is, from the point of view of a videogame and its main objective, “non-essential”. What this does is to make the game space less a digital one and more a literary one, the player becomes less player and more reader, trying to navigate a world mediated through semiotics rather than action.

This semiotic approach makes the characters immediately accessible in ways that the conventions of narrative digital realism would not be able to maintain. Conway and Joseph are introduced as two people in serious economic insecurity. Joseph’s gas station is dilapidated and suffers seemingly intentional power brownouts. When Conway goes to Joseph’s computer, the player sees that he cannot pay his electricity bill and is in arrears with the Consolidated Power Company, an organisation which seems to own most of the institutions of the entire game world. The delivery that Conway is making is his last – on account of the company going out of business. In other words, the game world of KRZ is mediated through two important things – systems of language, and systems of debt, and as the game goes on, it increasingly seems to suggest that in many ways, these two systems are immensely similar. Importantly, this early scene establishes a theme that the entire game revolves around - namely, debt is not simply an *economic* condition. Neoliberalism is not simply an expression of abstract economics, but a theoretical explanation for the complete subordination of all human experience to the logic of the market. Conway and Joseph are fixed to the roles like actors in a performance, forced to restage gestures of repayment, service and good employment even when it has become painfully clear that no matter how hard they work, they will not be able to improve their condition. Debt, at a certain point, erases agency, leaving those within it no way out. While trying to restore the power to Joseph’s computer, Conway ends up going into the basement and sees three characters who are playing an old-fashioned tabletop role playing game (TTRPG). These characters seem not to be able to see Conway, and as one says in reference to the game they (and the real-world players) are

playing: "I don't think you 'can' win. It says on the box it's a tragedy." (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2013. Act I, Scene I, gamers-four-b) Can one "win" KRZ? From the outset, the game tells the players the truth – it, (like the economic system which produced it) is a tragedy.

After refuelling and getting directions, Conway and their dog try, via a Kentucky roadmap, to find the location of Weaver Márquez, a character mentioned by Joseph as someone who might know his ultimate destination of 5 Dogwood Drive. Conway finds Weaver at her family farmhouse. While there, she explains to Conway that in order to reach the delivery address, he must make his way through the *Zero*, a strange semi-mystical underground highway that has only been mentioned so far in hushed tones. While Weaver points out a way to the "*Zero on-ramp*", she also mentions her cousin, Shannon who works as a TV repairwoman. Weaver's directions to the *Zero* are revealed to be a ruse, pointing to the actual location of Shannon Márquez, and, more importantly, a site-in-itself of economic tragedy and ruin: the Elkhorn Mine.

A Kentucky setting that leads into a mine inevitably recalls the Coal Wars of the early 20th century, the armed labour conflicts in Kentucky, Colorado, and West Virginia (BOISSONEAULT, 2017). KRZ, however, does not depict a conflict, but its seemingly inevitable and deeply tragic aftermath. The tragedy of the Elkhorn mine is also tied up with debt. Exploring the mine, the player finds that the miners rationed their electricity out of necessity, and paid for it through company "scrip". This electricity was what helped the miners run fans, pumps and mine lights but, when the mine flooded, the pumps failed and only a few people who worked in the mine survived. Here, the environmental storytelling of the game's setting mirrors the historical record of actually existing American labour history, grounding its storytelling and world building elements in concrete examples of exploitative, indebted economics.

The player learns this tragedy not only as Conway, but with, and also playing as, Shannon, the TV repairwoman that, like almost every single character in KRZ, is also in financial difficulty. The two characters meet at the entrance to the mine, as she looks for something Weaver told her to find, and Conway looks for the *Zero*. It is remarkable how, amongst the first possible things the two characters can say to each other, they talk of haunting and ghosts, and yet, it is not of places they speak, but of the hauntings that can befall a person, the ghosts that can lead a person, or the ones they themselves left behind.

After entering the cave Conway injures his leg in a rockfall, leading the two to explore the dark, labyrinthine ruins of the mine to find another exit. Through their limited navigation, having to move back and forth in the dark and with scant landmarks, the player fumbles their way out of the mine, not before finding the full extent of the tragedy and its effects on everyone around, including Shannon, as her parents also died there.

And yet the picture the game presents isn't just of bleakness, but of the memories, the joys, the very songs that the miners used to sing and that were recorded and noted down by two archivists who survived the tragedy (Weaver's parents). In this interconnected web of relationships, family, and tragedy, we see not only the economic and financial debt that pervades human sociality, but the Utopian traces – the *Spuren*, or *Traces*, as Ernst Bloch would put it (BLOCH, 2005) – of relationships which are not mediated or determined through capital exchange. Weaver and Shannon were close as children, and their lives, as were their parents' lives, were all around the mine. Their relationships were established via that economic-social space and continue to affect them since. It is then notable how, with Conway injured, Shannon is bound to him, feeling responsible for his injury, and, being almost as unmoored and precarious as he, decides to accompany him in his delivery.

The two return to the Márquez farmhouse, but all they find is a vacant building, with a broken television mentioned earlier. Shannon explains the farmhouse history and the extent to which her family had to go into debt simply to keep a roof over their heads. The throughline comes into the open once more, as Shannon asks Conway about his own debts. His answer is interestingly doubly-loaded: “I owe some people some apologies” he tells Shannon (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2013. Act I, Scene IV, intro). Life in KRZ, and capitalist modernity more generally, involves debt: after all, to be an individual is to be indebted. The attachment of debt to a person defines them and their social role vis-a-vis various societal institutions. Of great importance here is one's status – how they are seen as worthy or unworthy of credit, a personifying element on its own (MCCLANAHAM, 2016, p. 55-95).

The act concludes with the mundane task of Shannon doing “her work”, fixing the broken television left by Weaver. It is this, then, that creates a path forward for Conway and the delivery, this action is what opens the “Zero on-ramp”, but not in the mine, in the middle of the Márquez farmhouse barn. The scene closes with the truck entering the mysterious highway and the delivery continuing on its way to 5 Dogwood Drive. At first, the game explains little. The interactivity is minor, but of significant impact. As a player we accompany

both characters, see their responses, lines and attitudes, and the spaces they live within. Yet, these things cannot be significantly transformed, but merely engaged with. Ultimately, there is one tragic path that cannot be avoided nor fundamentally altered. Conway injures his leg, Shannon joins him, they enter the *Zero*. Still, the player can embrace this environment, the relationships, the history there, they can wander and linger before continuing the delivery. And in remaining, more of the people and the world around them can be approached and felt, even if not necessarily understood, similar to the ruins and tragedies that can be felt and seen, but never fully grasped.

Limits & Demonstrations

The first interlude of the game, breaking up any sense of linear continuity, puts the player in control of three characters that appeared before, the group playing a tabletop game in the gas station basement, as they attend an art exhibition by a person not yet introduced by the game. The collection, which shares its title with the interlude itself, is of a variety of pieces by installation artist Lula Chamberlain, each pushing the physical and logistical medium of their environment, space, and even viewer.

The striking aspect of this interlude, most of which comprise a single scene, is the introduction of Lula through her work. She is presented first as creator, engaged in digital and physical media, reflecting on the relationship art can have and exert on space, with material, with the viewer and with the artist themselves. However, when the player meets Lula in Act Two, through their “day-job” they are encountered as a senior desk clerk for a strange institution. The Artist, as a cultural figure and type, is presented as such, only to be immediately dethroned and presented as yet another person in another manner of financial and social frustration.

While the art exhibit itself is significant, when placed in context it becomes an illustration of the constraints placed upon creativity under capitalist modernity. Her impressive installations, her attention to media and art are, as we are also told, a lifelong effort, but they are not enough to live by. At first glance the interlude and the collection refer to the artwork itself, but we argue that it also relates to the conditions from which these pieces come, and the sense in which the exhibition demonstrates the possibilities and the limits to artistic work and expression under contemporary capitalism, alongside the myriad of circumstances of financial distress.

Act Two

The return to the main story of KRZ finds the player following the previously mentioned Lula Chamberlain. She is not simply an artist but is also a clerk for the “Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces”, an organisation that assigns new uses to spaces deemed underused. Simply put, the Bureau is a bureaucracy for the capital forces of gentrification. Fundamentally, it is an institution that secures land value and the extraction of value from those locations. Unsurprisingly, its “reassignments” are often to other institutions, in the case of the Bureau itself, or to powerful corporations like the Consolidated Power Company or, as we shall see later, the Hard Times Distillery.

Our first contact with Lula in this act, even prior to helping Conway and Shannon, is her throwing away a rejection letter for an art grant. Yet again, financial precarity is at the forefront of the characters’ lives. Lula’s art (to which the player has already been introduced) is made less significant, and less sustainable. Art is precarious, dependent on other organisations and trusts, all of which render some forms worthy, and others not. In other words, Lula’s struggles serve as a synecdoche for the ways in which artistic creation is judged and sustained by finance. An echo, indeed, of the patronage we mentioned earlier, and how KRZ as a game was made in this manner, and yet, the attention given to Lula also demonstrates how there are other, larger artistic forms, especially installation art, that demand more resources. As such, while Cardboard Computer was able to create its videogame via crowdfunding, Lula’s artwork demanded specific, wealthier patrons that, at this moment, she does not have.

The start of this act is also a break from following a group of characters, as Lula is introduced in person, and controlled by the player. She does not follow the pair in their delivery, remaining only as a woman they passed by. Once more, we are faced with a break in how videogames present and depict themselves. If initially players consider the journey in KRZ as a gathering of different playable characters, they are almost immediately shown something different. If we are considering this game in terms of affect, then we are shown the interiorities, doubts, and difficulties of different people, whether they “join the party” or not. Lula has her own concerns, her own economic questions of precarity and dashed dreams, and though Shannon and Conway will meet her again, the player will not follow her full story. We won’t go into every single controllable character and their specifics, but it is noteworthy how the player follows both “major” and “minor” characters. While there is a

specific narrative in due course, the interweaving of stories and interactions breaks the idea that it is the main story that is the most significant one. There is a web of stories presented. Ultimately, it is not Conway or Shannon's story that becomes the most significant, but rather the player's, as they weave, and feel, and hear, and accompany the breadth of the people within the world of KRZ.

However, if the first turn of this act follows the realities and power of the Bureau, alongside its displacements, the second renews and intensifies the point of personal economic insecurity. This time through the precarity of healthcare. Conway's injury from the first act becomes far more serious, and Lula recommends a doctor. In their search, the two encounter the strange, and still under-construction, Museum of Dwellings, a place meant to feature and represent different types and kinds of homes. Of course, in-line with the theme of displacement in this act, the museum was built on top of a neighbourhood that already existed, displacing all who lived there.

Or so it seemed – the game's presentation of gentrification and displacement is given an ironic twist because the residents didn't leave: after all, they had nowhere else to go. So they continue to reside in their homes, in spite of them being inside an observed and monitored space. The whole scene inside the museum is told from the perspective of people watching the security footage while they talk about Conway, Shannon, and the residents. While there is a painful and unmistakable irony in a museum that destroys the very objects it seeks to preserve and document, there is a tragic tone to the "resistance" witnessed, but that does not diminish its effect. Even with the alienation of the neighbourhood in favour of the isolated "dwellings" inside the museum, the people still live, still survive. Unfortunately for Conway, the doctor who lived in the area is no longer there, but they find another way to him.

Exploring the museum, the pair meet Ezra, a young boy, and his brother Julian, a giant eagle. The player discovers that, in order to help the residents in the museum sleep at night, Julian carries their houses into the forest so they can rest, and returns them in the morning. In this distinct form of displacement, that involves a space for rest and security, even if it means moving away from where you are with your house, the doctor asked not to be brought back to the museum. Ezra and Julian, however, offer to take Conway and Sharon there to get him the help he needs. The introduction of Julian and Ezra highlights the extent to which the presented world of KRZ is not a straightforwardly "realist" one, underscoring the degree to

which the apparent reasonable-ness and naturalised logic of market relations carries with it these moments of the irrational, and even the magical.

Over the course of the journey, as the player controls both the flight and Ezra, they learn of the boy's own precarious circumstances, having lost his family. The player discovers that he and his family were also victims of economic insecurity, having been evicted from their large house and forced to live in a bus stop. With Julian helping the boy enjoy his sleepless nights by flying around together, one morning the two returned to find no one there. In Ezra's story we can see how economic distress is not its own end, but a rolling snowball of social distress and challenges. It is an insight, as well, into Conway's previous comment on "I owe some people some apologies," debt compounds and multiplies, between people and their means, their homes, but also between one another.

Debt is political, economic, and crucially social. To live under a debt regime is to see the liquefaction of social relationships in the remorseless logic of extraction. Yet, new relationships can also emerge amidst this circumstance, as Ezra himself joins in on the delivery, to seek his parents. As Act Two closes on the three reaching the doctor and Conway being anaesthetised, it is worth underscoring that while tragedies unfold and are witnessed all around, people supporting one another is the only way Conway, and the others, have made it thus far. From getting directions from Joseph, to Weaver's pointers, from Shannon's help to Lula's directions; although weak and frail, there is a sense of support and solidarity that makes every step of this journey, of continuing on through pain and misery, possible.

The Entertainment

The second interlude further exemplifies the degree to which the game concerns itself with issues of agency, responsibility and freedom. The interlude takes the form of a meta-textual exercise, the staging of two plays by Lem Doolittle: "A Reckoning" and "A Bar-Fly." The two plays have been adapted for simultaneous performance and Lula Chamberlain is revealed to be the show's set designer, complaining that the script writer left little aside from dialogue, making the staging a technical challenge. From the outset the show is the antithesis of a mimetically satisfying experience. Doolittle's notes show him to be profoundly Brechtian, concerned less with the portrayal of a realistic life-world and more with an aesthetic act of estrangement. Couple this with the limited agency of the game's mechanics

and the interlude is a metatextual exploration of the ways in which all of life is determined by external and often deeply impersonal forces.

The play is set in a bar – The Lower Depths – and it opens on Evelyn in conversation with the barkeep, Harry. Evelyn is concerned that her husband who is away from home on business selling hammers in Texas will be unfaithful. Comforting her about her emotional and relationship anxiety, Harry confesses he is only selling Hard Times whisky, after making a deal of some sort with the whisky distributor. From there we are introduced to Pearl, who comes to the bar looking for her parents. Pearl seems uncomfortable about the nature of Hard Times whisky and her own economic responsibility for constantly paying for her parents bar tab. Debt seems omnipresent already and as Harry says, “you never know when they’ll... be reckoned and called in” (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2013. The Entertainment). Towards the end of the interlude, the audience is introduced to Pearl’s parents, Rosa and Lawrence, both of whom drink heavily and are deeply economically precarious, dependent on Pearl to keep paying their tab. All of the patrons of The Lower Depths are in debt, but the final reveal of the “show” is that Harry too is indebted. After giving away too many drinks to keep his clients he too has run out of credit. Characters have remarked that there is something strange about the Hard Times distillery and Harry reveals that “all they want is debt! They feed on it! They put it in the whiskey!” (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2013. The Entertainment). Distraught, the clients of The Lower Depths argue that their debt is not to the distillery, but to Harry, the bartender. To which Harry can only sadly respond that he’s traded their debt, financializing his clientele in a horrifyingly literal sense.

The whole sequence ends when, after the performance is done, the player turns toward the audience seats, only to see a glowing skeleton standing there and reading the script. While he is a strange, surreal inclusion and the first of its kind in the game, they are but one of several figures like that, which the player and the characters will encounter from the third act onwards: they are workers for the Hard Times Distillery. The Entertainment then is not just an experiment in Brechtian theatre, but uses the determinism and alienating impact of its Brechtian techniques to make a wider point about the fundamental lack of agency experienced in the debt based economy of neoliberalism. We are all just performers on a stage, condemned to a rote recitation of our lines, trapped within stage directions of debt and alienation that we can barely even perceive. The Hard Times workers are skeletal, a horrifying literalization of the ways in which debt will take even from the dead. Credit extends beyond human finitude

and debt can be called in at any point. And so, even in life, debt is not just an economic problem, but something which robs human beings of their agency. In debt there can be no freedom – not even in death.

Act Three

The return to the main narrative is done indirectly through focalising Conway inside a memory distorted by the anaesthesia. He recalls one of the last conversations with his employer and friend, Lysette, as they talked about his incoming final delivery. It is a conversation touched by tragedy and loss, as they recall her late husband and son, Ira and Charlie, and the better days of the Antiques' store. Once again, these are the personal aspects of debt and financial turmoil, pervading the characters and their very own image of the future. The indebtedness is a doom, slowly or quickly felt, but that continuously adds to the effects of tragedy in the world of KRZ and the lives of its inhabitants, and presumably, in our own reality as well.

As Conway wakes, the presence of debt returns in full force. Medical help doesn't come without cost and the driver is now indebted to the aforementioned Consolidated Power Company. Conway's own leg looks different, skeletal and glowing, "foreign", as he describes it, a grim comparison to the full skeleton seen at the end of the previous interlude. While this isn't initially evident, the skeletal element is not perceived literally as such by other characters, possibly only to the player, and functions as a quite literal incarnation of the living death of debt under capital. Conway's leg is like that because *it does not belong to him anymore*, yet another reason for it to feel "foreign" (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2014. Act III, Scene I, not-my-leg).

After the appointment, the three return to the museum so they can continue the delivery. Following some debate over where to go next in order to reach the address, the truck breaks down. As the scene cuts away to a couple on a motorcycle, Junebug and Johnny, they drive past but, drawn towards Conway's dog, head back to help, and invite everyone to their musical performance, which all attend.

The gig, presented in the empty bar, "The Lower Depths", is representative of the interactivity in KRZ. Junebug starts to perform a song, "Too Late to Love You", but the player can choose stanzas of the song, making them active agents in the construction of the particular aesthetic performance. The player could not have meaningfully changed any of the

events themselves, like the mine accident or the truck breaking down, but they can still engage and talk with the other characters as they see fit, lightly shifting the tone and allowing these small moments to become integral parts of the history of these people and how they act towards each other.

At the end of the song, economic precarity creeps back in, with the bar owner unable to pay the couple, as all he has is an IOU from the Distillery. Furthermore, Johnny and Junebug are shown to be in similar insecurity, not having much to their name aside from their motorbike and instruments, and, like the trio of Conway, Shannon, and Ezra, are also homeless. As such, they join them in their delivery and, after getting directions from the bar owner, find yet another way to get to the *Zero* and hopefully, 5 Dogwood Drive. Interestingly, Johnny and Junebug aren't even human, but automatons made to recover the aforementioned Elkhorn Mine for the company. However, in finding the tapes Weaver's parents had recorded of the miners, the two found purpose in music, and ran away to become musicians themselves. Culture, art and expression are thus cross-historical and immensely powerful, able to undo even the alienation of capitalism's own technology.

Returning to the *Zero*, however, the group runs into a great chasm inside a place the game calls "The Hall of the Mountain King", a large rock spire inside the caves of the *Zero* that is inhabited by Donald, his assistants, and his life's work, XANADU, a broken down supercomputer. It is here that KRZ engages with the history of its own medium, as the interaction with the computer, initially garbled, is later revealed to be text from the very first so-called adventure game, the text-based, "Colossal Cave Adventure", from 1976. Here history loops into intertextuality – the player is in the *Zero* which is a fictional underground cave highway in Kentucky, recreating "Colossal Cave." The original "Colossal Cave" is set in a fantastic version of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, a sprawling set of caverns, and the longest known cave system in the world. XANADU, as an element in-game, is the ever-incomplete project of Donald, and is the embodiment of a shared personal history of the three friends that started it, Donald, Lula and Joseph. In other words, the game directly calls back its history and the history of video games more broadly, by placing it anew and enveloping it within its story.

After playing with XANADU in its fixed state, the group finds Lula has arrived, and she gives them the final directions to reach 5 Dogwood Drive by pointing out they need to take the mail ferry across the underground Echo River, still within the *Zero*. As they wait for

the boat, the game shows what was necessary to get XANADU functioning through the side quest Shannon and Conway undertook inside a church some distance from the Hall of the Mountain King. Inside the church was an elevator to the underground Hard Times Distillery, operated and handled entirely by the glowing skeletons, mentioned before only by Donald as “horrible strangers” (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2014. Act III, Scene V, strangers-appearance).

As Conway and Shannon enter the distillery, they are offered a tour, and the player finds out that all the workers are in one form or another of debt bondage. Employees are forced to work for the distillery until their debts are paid. The distillery becomes their home with workers being charged interest for every single moment they are not actively working, including sleep. It is the ultimate nightmare of employment under gig-economy neoliberal capitalism, where you are either working or being punished by having to pay for not-working. Through the environment the player can listen in to some of the stories of the various indistinct skeletons around, as the tour guide shares their tale of woe. Some are victims of bad investments, others of unfortunate accidents, regardless, their ending was always the same: continued, perpetual servitude to the Hard Times Distillery.

At the end of the tour, their guide tells Conway that he is hired as a delivery driver for the distillery, offering him a drink to mark the occasion. While Shannon protests, Conway drinks. Indirectly, the game has suggested that Conway is a recovering alcoholic, a drinking problem that seems to have contributed to the accident in which Lysette’s husband and son died. Conway drinks. No matter what the player might do, or feel, the mouse cursor is pulled towards it -- just as we heard right at the beginning, the game is a tragedy, through and through. And though Shannon voices her disagreement yet again, the guide emphasises how expensive that drink was, and that the tour itself was a very costly affair. Conway had already been enveloped into that web of debt from the very start of this scene, which serves as synecdoche for his status as always-already indebted. As the game returns to the entire cast waiting for a ship, a tugboat arrives, with a mechanical woolly mammoth at the front, bellowing its horn. It is the *Mucky Mammoth*, the boat that will take everyone and the truck along the Echo River and, hopefully, towards 5 Dogwood Drive.

Here And There Along The Echo

The penultimate interlude is, like the art installation or the performance, a contained space. It is a telephone that the player can use to call a single number. The service that titles this section, which states itself as “a guide to the Echo River for drifters and pilgrims” (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2014. *Here And There Along the Echo*, intro). Notably, the player has yet to be in and traverse the river, that will be the environment of Act Four. Narrated by a character that the player will, once again, only meet in the following act, one can traverse an elaborate phone tree finding registers of the sounds of the river, of stories, histories and legends of it, anticipating the course of the next act of the game. In terms of gameplay, the player can navigate the service as thoroughly or as briefly as they want, and then move on, leaving in their hands how much to engage in both the phone line and the culture stored within.

However, aside from the specific circumstances in-game and the relationship the phone service has with the story, it demonstrates a specific relationship between cultural and historical knowledge, and its technological preservation. After all, this is a “computerised” record and access to the world that surrounds us. It is an isolated answering service that holds the records of the Echo River, told by its narrator, Will. In one sense, the history has become detached from the place, turning into a disembodied, ghostly record of what that place is/can be. It turns into both record and interface to the world, accessible not only by a specific voice, but a specific service, after all, as long as that specific automated response-line is upheld, all that is there remains intact, but if not, all those registers are cut off at once.

Here And There Along The Echo demonstrates a contemporary relationship between culture and the access to it, one that depends on the health and stability of not just an intermediary, but an intermediary *platform*. One that is also cut off from individual or collective access, while Will is a big part of the service, it is platformed by, as he states, the “Bureau of Secret Tourism”, an entity that, if it decides to shut it down, can not only remove access to a register of culture, but delete it entirely, all independently. Although the game discusses it in terms of lower technology and not in the sense of “clouds” or “servers”, the point stands of both the individual and the collective access to culture, in its content and structure, and an underlying precarity which pervades it, both in KRZ and our world.

Act Four

The game returns to the cast as they traverse the Echo River in the *Mucky Mammoth* tugboat. This section of the game is unique as it is impossible to fully experience in a single playthrough. As the boat sails the river, there are choices of who the player wants to accompany or be with, one alternative excluding the other. Ultimately, it doesn't meaningfully change the narrative, but as with all previous choices it continues to alter the relationship the player can have with its characters and how they can respond to events and circumstances. Given the act's options and length, we shall discuss a few key elements that both connect to points previously mentioned, and bring forth novel ways to engage with them.

We begin with Shannon talking to the character who narrated the information about the Echo River in the interlude, Will. He is a classically trained organist, with a minor in French literature, and who formerly taught theatre at a local university. However, he narrates how his life was made precarious by university budget cuts, which left him doing odd jobs around campus, and ultimately, made his way to the Echo and to Cate, the boat captain, turning into her assistant. While he also records and narrates stories about the river, its people, its environments and more, in practice, he is in just as much precarious employment. Will can represent another facet of the emergence of the "precarariat", this precarious labour force that, under terrible conditions, does informal work in a variety of areas and fields. He wasn't just fired, he was kept as someone to do odd jobs, and found his way doing that in the Echo River as well. The saving grace was in also finding room to do something that engaged him, this folkloric and cultural record-making.

It doesn't, however, give Will any kind of real economic security. Notably, neither his experience, nor his training, nor his degree, can help him become any more economically stable. The overall portrait of debt that KRZ presents is one from which there is no real, direct escape, even if, in the midst of it, one can find some renewal of meaning or purpose. All the characters are in some sense drifting, finding what they can, and if something positive can also be said, is that Will is not alone, but always in touch with other people, be it the captain or the other folks along the Echo that they often run into.

Another significant element of this initial scene on board the *Mucky Mammoth* is a conversation between Shannon and Conway about his indebtedness to the distillery. If before only Conway's fixed leg was skeletal, now his arm is so, as he drinks a beer, commenting on his various failed attempts at long-lasting sobriety, and his inability to overcome his

addiction. Lysette may have always taken care of him in the past, but she has her own serious medical issues. Conway is present in this act, but he seems to slowly become more and more distant, not even being controlled by the player, already looking closer to belonging to the distillery, than anything else.

Though we will swiftly advance to a later section of the act, it's worth commenting on some of what can happen in between. The player can decide to follow Ezra as he explores an islet in the river, or Shannon as she watches tapes made by her cousin Weaver. Or as she joins the crew and cast to visit the beach of "The Rum Colony" bar, its patrons and the musician Cyrano, a friend of Junebug and Johnny's. Ultimately though, through even more potential encounters with some of the river's oddities, places, or just the crew spending some quiet time together, Conway and Shannon end up heading, by a small raft, to the formerly known "Echo River Central Exchange".

They are asked, by Cate, to deliver a package there, a telephone operating station operating out of a flooded train station, which has been recently acquired by the Consolidated Power Company and become "Consolidated Auxiliary Switch Number 30". On the way there, they pass through a bat sanctuary, which has, at the entrance, a shrine to the miners who had died at the disaster mentioned in the first act, in Elkhorn Mine. As the characters discuss the meaning of that memory and the pain, sorrow, and hatred that remained after such tragedy, it is also a memory for the player of the impact of such loss, as its signs are on the world and in the people in it, Shannon in particular. We note, then, the message left by those that outlived the disaster, in all caps, that the player cannot but read:

We claim these helmets in the names of the folks who wore them and we place them here in their memory but also as a spit in the greedy green eye of that power company who bought up our old mine and traded our brothers' and sisters' safety for a little more yield but only yielded twenty-eight good men and women dead when the walls collapsed and the tunnels filled with water. Their lungs were black but now they're washed clean and full of water too and swept through hidden tunnels into some awful cave we never will find and so we guess the water buried them for us so let this here be the marker for their grave. And if any son of a bitch from that power company wants to take back these helmets as company property just you try it and see what will happen (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2016. Act IV, Scene VII, intro, sign-2).

The memorial is a stake of class history, placed and contextualised in the present. It is remarkable as one of the clearest acts of resistance seen throughout KRZ. While there is a lot of passive and quiet resistance, this sign and symbol, while simple, still makes itself known

and visible. The tragedy happened, and yet, the struggle for its memory and remembrance carries on, and is no less significant because of it. This will to carry on after a disaster will also return as a point of note in the next act, as we follow through the game's tragedy in full. What's notable about the signs is that the game acknowledges the tensions between the memorialization of working class life, and the ways in which capitalists treat those workers as essentially nothing but property. The workers were entangled with their helmet – they were, in a sense, those helmets, and as such those helmets have to be recontextualized as something other than merely “COMPANY PROPERTY.”

Making their way through the memorial and the sanctuary, the pair also pass some Hard Times workers that Conway waves to, affirming to Shannon that he believes all will turn out well, though she remains distraught at that level of servitude. As Conway carries the raft through the tunnel, she gets off and meets Dashiell, who believes he still is employed there, but isn't, and the last actual worker, Poppy. She explains how, after the power company took over, there has been intense downsizing and the hope of fully automating all workers. Poppy is thus training her own replacement, the automated machine. Her very work is building towards her own obsolescence. While she is not formally precarious, she will imminently be, and there is nothing she can do to prevent it – in fact, the more effectively she works, the more she optimises herself out of employment. Automation here is, as often happens in reality, not a way to free the worker, to give them time or means to pursue less menial tasks, no, it is a mechanism to cut costs, to avoid paying a real human being, with no care given to that person, or even the job and its quality. Neither are significant, only the payroll and the largest amount of profits possible.

Having finished the delivery and ready to head back to the tugboat, Shannon turns around to see Conway, fully skeletal, inside a raft with two other Hard Times' workers, sailing away. The player watches in shock, as the very first character they started KRZ off is leaving them, unable to help or change the result, and left with the single, uncertain choice, of having Conway's named (or unnamed) dog, follow him to the distillery, or stay behind with Shannon.

As the act carries through in Shannon silently making her way back to the boat and meeting up with the rest of the cast as they make a few more stops before the underground portion of 5 Dogwood Drive, the tragedy is felt firsthand. Debt, precarity, lack of healthcare, alcoholism, homelessness and more have driven Conway away, into the only possible solution

for him, debt bondage. Although so far the crux of considering KRZ has been by taking a look at the many economic realities, this sequence emphasises the social costs involved. How it can break apart the friendships, the bonds, the solidarity that can exist between people in this - in our - world of economic precarity.

The act closes off as, finally, the boat reaches the underside of 5 Dogwood Drive, a large silo without any lifts, and everyone decides to leave the truck behind and carry up the deliveries on foot, up the long stairs. Although Lysette's Antiques' is presumably no more and Conway himself less so, they all decide to follow through with their "quest", do this last task for their gone friend, and try to figure it out from there. Looking upwards at the long stairs and the uncertainty of the end, the act ends in sorrow and doubt.

Un Pueblo De Nada

The last interlude starts with another environment of economic precarity, the community-run television station WEVP-TV. Controlling Emily, a producer at the station, the player can look around her and both keep the broadcast functioning, and investigate her surroundings: from the Video Databank, to the other people working there. It is a regular show, even if the atmosphere is strained, as a storm and flash flood intensify and ultimately destroy the studio – though all seem to survive.

What is notable in this interlude is the role media can have in a community, as a place of engagement, shared understanding, and exchange. There is some poetry, some callers, and an artistic performance in the form of the weather broadcast. It is a particular kind of media, one where the mediations are operated on a local, personal level, in service of, and stemming from the community it is ultimately there to serve. Furthermore, what titles this interlude is a recorded show played for the broadcast, one that talks of the history of the place the community is in. While it is something that can be heard in the background, the in-game broadcast can be watched in full, in live-action, at <http://wevp.tv/>, making the game's broadcast almost "real", even detailing elements heard briefly in the background. The "People from Nothing", that title this section of the game, are a people about whom little is known, descending from Central America, that built structures and made that area their home, before they suddenly disappeared. A people whose only records are not in the places themselves, but in extensive notes for the place they deemed to be a library, detailing their "scientific" way of life. But there are no final records, leaving the narrator to infer there might have been a moral

catastrophe that didn't necessarily destroy the individuals, but the community and the ideas which it upheld. Though the people may have carried on living, that which held them together was no more.

Pairing with a people that, as such, was no more, there is a further element to this section of the game, a direct reference to Mark Fisher's **The Weird and the Eerie**. As two characters try to listen to ghosts using a modified radio, the player can decide between Emily's comments on it as "weird" or "eerie" (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2018. Un Pueblo de Nada, recording). Between the Video Databank with thousands of tapes created by and sent by the community, alongside those produced by the station, all stored there in this small closet in the station's shack, and the forms of spectral communication with both the people around them and ghosts themselves; this chapter is both about what is there and what isn't, what might be, and what might still be worth reaching. In this run-down tv station with leaks and cracks, there are, at every turn, attempts to connect with other people, even in the midst of a storm and precarious circumstances. In pairing this sense with the rest of KRZ and the final sections of the game, it brings to bear how even amidst difficulties, and debt, and frustration, the attempts at connection, with other people, with those on the road, and even those that are absent - thinking of Conway and Weaver - are worthwhile, and are meaningful. Although the player witnesses the last broadcast of WEVP-TV, the destruction of the station and its Video Databank, it is by no means less important because of it.

Act Five

The final act of KRZ is played more uniformly than others, as, paired with occasional dialogue options and conversations followed, the player controls a cat moving around and inspecting their surroundings. These surroundings are the town of which WEVP-TV was a part, and contains 5 Dogwood Drive, a "house" that contains a roof and walls but only on two of its sides. The scene is the morning after the storm and after Shannon, Ezra, Johnny and Junebug climbed up the long spiral staircase from the end of the previous act, brought up all the furniture and antiques from the truck, and placed it inside the frame house.

This is the aftermath of a natural disaster, and the town is reeling from the destruction and the tragic death of two horses which were an essential fixture to the community, known as "The Neighbors". It is also the culmination of the "tragedy" within KRZ as followed from the very start, the seeming "end" of this community, with the horses, the station, and the

environment damaged. Many of the conversations at this point are about the next path, both for the residents and for the cast so far, which the player can decide or perhaps influence, whether they stay or go. To rebuild and carry on, with the previous scars, or to move on, search for other pastures and build there. The question KRZ poses is what comes next, what to do next and how. Scott Benson, indie game developer, writes in an article about the relationship between KRZ and disaster (BENSON, 2021). Writing in lieu of the COVID pandemic and the many tragedies therein, he points out how to move on after the worst has happened, and act five is precisely that. While this section culminates with the burial and eulogy of the horses, *The Neighbors*, it is perhaps the mourning of what the community was, up to this point. Yet, in solidarity and in community, it doesn't need to be the end.

Thinking back on Shannon, Conway, Junebug, Johnny, and Ezra, there is tragedy throughout their stories. Shannon, who has lost her family, her cousin, and now her home; Conway, who lost all to alcoholism and the passage of time; Junebug and Johnny, made to recover the loss of the mine, but who seek music and themselves in the process; and Ezra, who lost his home, then most of his family. They are all figures embedded with and throughout loss, disaster and, ultimately, tragedy. But none of their stories ended as such, save for Conway, they all found places and people, including one another, to carry on, to find meaning, to live out each day.

Fitting, then, that the final shot of KRZ is everyone, after the funeral, inside 5 Dogwood Drive, playing music and being together. Regardless of all that has happened, and all that might come, and even the potential choices of the player for the characters so far, they can be together, and take this moment of joy and community, in a house that would be empty and incomplete, save for them. None of the issues have disappeared, nor the grief, nor the insecurity, much less the debts, but, for a time, it feels manageable, joy is still possible, and still reachable.

Death of the Hired Man - Epilogue & Conclusion

And yet, through all the tragedy and the very end of the delivery, the game still has one treat in store, an epilogue, of sorts, which we shall also use as a conclusion. This last section, titled after the poem by Robert Frost, is a conversation followed inside the previously visited bar, *The Lower Depths*, where the player can only switch the television channel and listen on. This last section follows the poem quite closely, recounting events similar to the

relationship between the bar owner, Harry, and his help, friends of his and the other person in the conversation, Carrington. The two talk about the financial difficulties they both face, the challenge of even being able to pay, and what having a place to call home means.

If anything, though in a relatively discrete way, this epilogue connects all the themes present in KRZ. The economic precarity shows up again in the conversation about the “hired man”, the unlikelihood of even paying him, and how Harry often has to give him a space to sleep. In terms of the relationship to media and artistry, the characters pay almost no mind to the television – the only element the player can control in this scene –, it functions mostly as background noise, not worth engaging with, but to be left behind and forgotten. Notably, Carrington himself is an artist, having put forth the show in *The Entertainment*, and is venting his frustration at not having been able to accomplish one with the same name as the Frost poem, in spite of unknowingly becoming a character in this epilogue’s rendition of it.

Ultimately, the poem and the epilogue focalise the relationships of people between one another, of the support, the solidarity, and the challenges faced together, in spite of precarity. There is, however, a strong distinction between the poem and the KRZ scene; in the former, the character of Harry goes to check on the man who was sleeping, get him to a proper bed, and finds him dead. In the latter, however, the grim ending of “‘Dead,’ was all he answered” (FROST, 1915. p. 23) is replaced by the following dialogue lines from Harry: “He’s asleep. On the floor, with a roll of paper towels as a pillow [...] No, it’s alright. Let him rest” (CARDBOARD COMPUTER, 2020. Death of the Hired Man). In spite of all the tragedy involved within KRZ, there is a single, unique, subtle death averted, replaced by the gentleness towards a sleeping man. Life was kept and preserved, insecure, perhaps, but still there, still significant, in its simplicity.

KRZ engaged intimately with the present realities of capitalist modernity, from the economic oppression and insecurity, all the way to the artistic difficulties, and the social relationships of people. There is no single clear reading of this text, much less one that does not consider this wide variety of approaches the game offers. What was intended thus far was to both recover this videogame, its many moments, instances, and possibilities, and expand upon how it evades any one reading, it breaks apart its medium, its subjects, even its very characters, to continue exploring these wider themes and such varied media and mediums. It is a game, after all, it presents itself as such and is sold like one, but it evades such simple classifications, all while offering us equal rigour in presentation, in analysis and as cultural

object. If there is a kind of “final” remark to be made of *Kentucky Route Zero* is in its diversity, and how it is deeply interested in culture, in almost all of its shapes and manifestations, even itself. To study and present this game is to, first and foremost, comprehend the current cultural realities, in economics, in art, and in society. It is a game that refuses to engage with anything less than the world it is a part of, and thus, adds to it, from the inside of its text, and the outside, as a game that continues to offer more to think about, as text, as videogame, as culture.

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