Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero

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Introduction

Kentucky Route Zero (Cardboard Computer, 2013) is an episodic "magical realist adventure game" (Cardboard Computer, 2014). Although the game is framed as a typical point-and-click adventure game, from the start there are indications that there is something weird about the game, not just in terms of the story content and art direction, which are indeed quite unusual, but also at the level of the language of interaction.

Games have developed a specific language and vocabulary for interaction that game players have learned to recognize. When interaction and gameplay does not follow these conventions, players may find it takes some effort to figure out how to play a game, or in some cases find it difficult to consider a work to even be a game. However, according to Juul and Norton:

> *...much poetry takes effort to read, but this is a feature rather than a bug, as it cues readers into shifting their focus from the meaning of the words to the words themselves. Poetry is language not simply about communication, but about the beauty of language. Likewise, a game is an activity not simply about accomplishing something, but about the beauty of the activity itself. (Juul and Norton, 2009)*

This suggests that the deliberate use of difficult, unfamiliar interaction and gameplay in games can be seen as analogous to the use of language in poetry. The use of language to make the familiar

unfamiliar is referred to in literary criticism as defamiliarization. According to Viktor Shklovsky:

> *...art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception... (Shklovsky, 1965)*

It is the use of defamiliarization that separates poetry from everyday language. This notion of defamiliarization involves the "prolonging [of] the process of perception" through the "[s]ystematic disturbance of the categorization process [which] makes low-categorized information, as well as rich pre categorial sensory information, available to consciousness" (Tsur, 1992, p. 4). Poetic language accomplishes this through disruption of expected patterns of rhyme, rhythm, syntax and meaning.

In this paper, I argue that Kentucky Route Zero makes use of defamiliarization to create what I will call "poetic interaction". Through a close reading of Kentucky Route Zero Acts I and II, and Limits and Demonstrations (Cardboard Computer, 2013), an accompanying "intermission" that was released after Act I, I explore the ways in which game mechanics and interaction can be defamiliarized to draw attention to the gameplay experience, and to encourage reflection on the nature of games and interaction.

Beginning With the Familiar

From the start, there is a tension in Kentucky Route Zero between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The game begins with a title sequence, consisting of two consecutive screens, each showing white text on a black background: "Act I, Scene I" and "Equus Oils". These are replaced by a scene of a sunset glowing over a mountain range, from which the camera slowly pans down to a gas station, "Equus

Oils", situated on the edge of a freeway. The lights are out, but you can just about make out a figure sitting in a chair at the pumps. An old truck pulls up, and a man and a dog get out. This opening sequence is evocative of a film more than a game, marking this work as potentially something other than the standard adventure game.

However, the game is also clearly situated in the point-and-click adventure game genre. A "look" icon in the shape of an eye, together with the text "Dog", appears above the dog, and a similar "look" icon and the text "Truck" appear above the truck (see Figure 1). Clicking on either causes the man standing near the truck to walk over to the associated object, and a description of the object is shown. For example, clicking on the dog shows the following text in a box just above the dog:

(An old hound in a straw hat. Both have seen better days.)

Figure 1. The opening sequence of Kentucky Route Zero.

There is something poetic about this text, not entirely unlike the offhand quips that players expect from adventure games, but also somewhat literary. The art style is also distinctive. Again, this suggests something other than the usual adventure game. At the same time, for anyone who has played a point-and-click adventure

game, this initial gameplay sequence immediately triggers a series of associations: "you" are Conway, the man who arrived in the truck, and the typical interactions associated with a point-and-click adventure game, such as moving around and inspecting the environment, talking to characters, picking things up, and solving puzzles, are available.

Gradually Making the Interaction Unfamiliar

However, it is not the visuals or the text that are the focus of the strangeness of the game. As the player continues to interact, there are hints that something about the interaction itself is unusual. The gradual defamiliarization of interaction takes place through the introduction of elements familiar to the point-and-click adventure game genre, followed by the gradual undermining of the player's expectations. This can be seen, for example, in the way that puzzles are used in the game.

After talking to Joseph, the man sitting at the gas pumps in the first scene, you discover that Conway is on his way to make a delivery to "5 Dogwood Drive". Joseph tells you that the only way to get to Dogwood Drive is through the mysterious "Kentucky Route Zero", often referred to simply as "The Zero". This delivery is the underlying purpose for Conway's actions throughout the game. However, getting there involves a series of convoluted steps, the first of which is to look for the directions to The Zero in Joseph's computer. Unfortunately, the power is out, so you first need to go down into the basement to reset the circuit breaker.

This seems like a traditional environmental manipulation puzzle (Fernandez-Vara 2009, p. 149): you need to have Conway go down to the basement, find the circuit breaker, and reset it. Once you reach the basement, however, you encounter a group of people sitting at a table, labeled "Basement People". On inspection, you discover that their names are Emily, Ben and Bob, and that they are sitting at an old card table, on which are strewn "papers, oddly-shaped dice, and highway maps". You are able to speak to them, but they can't seem

to hear you, as they are caught up trying to figure out the rules to a tabletop role-playing game:

> EMILY: (TO BOB) Did you hear something?
> BOB: (TO EMILY) Uh, no, sorry, I was looking at the rules again.
> BEN: (TO BOB) it gets easier as you go. Look, you said you rolled a "five", right? That means you pick up your marker and move it anywhere on the map.

As the conversation continues, you are given a clue as to a secondary puzzle that needs to be solved before the first puzzle:

> BOB: (TO BEN) It's your turn, right?
> BEN: (TO BOB) Oh, yeah I guess so. Where'd you put that twenty-sided die?
> EMILY: I don't see it. Did you drop it?
> BOB: Uh… it should be easy enough to find. It glows in the dark.

If you pursue the conversation, Conway repeatedly attempts to speak to the game players. They continue to ignore you, talking in detail about the rules of the game and repeating that they can't play until they have the die. For any adventure game player, this is a clear signal that you need to find the twenty-sided die.

As the players are blocking the passage to the right, the only place you can go to search for the missing die is to the left. You descend to the lower level of the basement, and the first thing you encounter is a sign, which you can inspect:

> (A dusty, rusty sign is bolted onto the wall)
>
> SIGN: THESE ARE THE RULES:
>
> 1. No open flame near the gasoline.
> 2. No consumption of beer or spirits on the premises.

> 3. In case of sudden darkness, do not panic. Relax. Count backwards from five.
> 4. Strictly limit time spent in the basement to fewer than three minutes of every hour.

For the adventure game player, this final rule seems to be particularly relevant: there is now presumably a need to quickly find the twenty-sided die, give it back to the players, and find the breaker, all within three minutes. The mention of "sudden darkness", together with your lamp, the fact that the missing die glows in the dark, and the large "light" control in the bottom center of the screen, suggest that turning off the lamp might help solve the puzzle.

As soon as you turn off the lamp, you see a "Game Piece" indicated just ahead of you in the dark, with a "pick up" icon (a hand) above it. Clicking on this icon, you see the following text:

> (CONWAY picks up the glowing twenty-sided die and inspects it. The number "five" is facing up. It's just a small piece of plastic, but it has a reassuring, almost comforting weight.
>
> He places the object in his jacket pocket.)

Heading back to the table, you find that the players are gone. Inspecting the table, you see:

> (Folding chairs are arranged around a worn card table. The chairs are empty, and the surface of the table is bare.)
>
> [(Conway places the twenty-sided die on the table.)]
> [(Conway keeps the twenty-sided die in his pocket and walks away.)]

(Note that throughout the paper, choices will be presented in square brackets, and the chosen response, if any, will be indicated in bold text.) You can now see the breaker from where you are standing, off

to the right of the screen. Regardless of what you do at this point, either place the die on the table or keep it, you can walk to the breaker and restore the lights. At no time is there any indication that anything will happen to you if you stay in the basement for more than three minutes.

All of this seems fairly standard in terms of a puzzle in an adventure game. There are, however, hints of strangeness. What happened to the people at the table? Why couldn't they see you? Did they really need their die back? Was there really any danger involved in staying more than three minutes in the basement? It all seems somewhat anticlimactic and unfamiliar, despite its familiar trappings.

This strangeness is reinforced when you talk to Joseph upon returning to the surface:

> JOSEPH: There it is. Just listen to those lights whine. Yep…
>
> [CONWAY: Well, I'd better get those directions and head to the Zero, if you don't mind.]
> **[CONWAY: There were some people down in your basement playing some kind of game, but they're gone now.]**
>
> JOSEPH: In the basement? No, I don't think so. Maybe that lamplight was playing tricks on you, huh? Well, strange things happen underground. Especially in the dark…

The weird happenings in the basement clearly fit the "magic realism" label applied to the game by its creators. However, as the next puzzle shows, it is not just the narrative content that is made strange in Kentucky Route Zero.

Poems and Un-fail-able Puzzles

Immediately following the circuit breaker puzzle, Joseph gives you another puzzle to solve before you can access the computer:

> So! Computer's in the office. You're looking for "Marquez." She knows her way around those roads: she'll get you to the Zero. The password is… uh… damn. I usually just feel it out. "Muscle memory," you know?
>
> Its kinda long, kinda like a short poem, I think. One of those short poems that really sums it all up.
>
> You'll figure it out.

When you attempt to login to the computer you are presented with a password prompt. The possible responses are the strongest indication so far that there is something unfamiliar, not just with the world of Kentucky Route Zero, but with the gameplay itself. Conway is presented with a sequence of text fragments that seem to form part of a poem, as Joseph had said:

> [CONWAY: (Typing) Wheels slide loose]
> [CONWAY: (Typing) The stars drop away]
> [CONWAY: (Typing) I talk and listen to him talking]

These fragments, and the two sets of fragments that follow, all seem to be drawn from your earlier conversation with Joseph, suggesting that you need to carefully try to remember and choose based on your memory. However, whatever choices you make the password is accepted. There is no possibility of failure.

The standard pattern in point-and-click adventure games is to place puzzles in the way of the player, forcing the player to solve the puzzle before she can move on. In Kentucky Route Zero, the only explicit puzzles that appear are in the first few minutes of the game, and even then, the puzzles seem impossible not to solve. Instead, they seem to be placed in the player's path to first make the gameplay seem familiar, and then to gradually undermine that familiarity as the player starts to wonder what, exactly, was the point of these puzzles. And that wondering, in itself, may be the point.

In this set of interactions, the player has been encountering seemingly familiar forms of interaction, common to point-and-click adventure games, but there has also been a suggestion that there is something strange going on. The interaction doesn't seem to be quite what is expected, and the choices you are making as a player don't seem to matter. The familiar is being made unfamiliar, in the process foregrounding the conventions involved in the experience of playing Kentucky Route Zero, and encouraging the player to reflect on the form of the game.

Unimportant and Uninformed Choices

Another way in which interaction is made unfamiliar in Kentucky Route Zero is through the unusual nature of choice during conversations. Conversations and dialogue trees are a standard mechanic in adventure games. In Kentucky Route Zero, much of the interaction consists of dialogues. However, many of the dialogue choices seem unimportant, simply leading the player to encounter different versions of the text but having no impact on the story or even how the other characters reply. Dialogue choices are also presented in such a way that there is no possible way for the player to make an informed choice, as she could not possibly have sufficient information about the options to make an informed decision.

An example of unimportant dialogue choices occurs during Act I Scene III, when Shannon Marquez, a character Conway meets at the entrance to the Elkhorn Mine, is attempting to calibrate the mine's PA system to be used as a form of sonar to determine the depth of the mine. As Shannon is attempting to power up the P.A., she says:

> SHANNON: I bet we just have to free up some power for the P.A. system. Everything is rationed. Here, set up that lamp of yours, and I'll go unplug these ceiling lights.
>
> [CONWAY: (Clears his throat nervously.)]
> [CONWAY: (Tries to think of something clever to say.)]
> [CONWAY: (Fidgets with some change in his pocket.)]

There is no reason to give the player a choice between these options, other than to foreground the lack of agency and meaningful choice on the part of the player. By making these choices available, the game defamiliarizes a very familiar convention, that of making a meaningful choice in a game. The player also has no means of determining which is the correct dialogue choice. In fact, there is no correct or incorrect choice. This further emphasizes the strangeness of these options being presented to the player in the first place. The player's expectation that she can have some control over the direction of the game is gradually being undermined, questioning the notions of choice and control.

Displacing the Player's Locus of Control

A further questioning of the player's control over the game comes through the displacement of the player's locus of control. This is foregrounded at the start of Act I Scene III, when the player first encounters Shannon. The scene begins with Conway's truck pulling up outside an old mine shaft, a possible entrance to The Zero. Conway and his dog step out of the truck, and the player is able to click on the "entrance" to the mine. The two enter the mine, and the scene shifts to the interior. We are shown a new character, standing alone, which the player will be tempted to mouse over in the hopes of finding a "look" or "talk" icon. Instead of being able to interact with the character, we are immediately shown a set of dialogue choices:

> (SHANNON speaks into the large brick cell phone held up to her ear.)
>
> [SHANNON: It's two hundred dollars for two weeks.]
> [SHANNON: Yeah, it kind of is an emergency.]
> [SHANNON: No, it's fine, I'll figure it out.]

At this point, not only does the player have no idea who "Shannon" is, she is also very unlikely to have been expecting to have to control a new, unknown character.

Although the ability to control multiple characters has long been a feature of adventure games, stretching all the way back to Maniac Mansion (Lucasfilm Games, 1987), the shift of control at this point is still likely to be unexpected and unfamiliar, as this is a new character, and there has been no indication before this that the player will be controlling multiple characters.

In addition, the player is being asked to make choices in a dialogue with absolutely no context for the choice. The unfamiliarity of this sequence is reinforced by the fact that, when the player makes any choice during this conversation, the response is as follows:

> PHONE: (Inaudible)
>
> **[SHANNON: That's true.]**
> [SHANNON: I guess he can't kick me out for another week or two.]
> [SHANNON: But can I trust him not to just change the locks?]
>
> PHONE: (Inaudible)

Not only has the locus of control shifted to a new character, the player also has to make dialogue choices that are completely out of context, with the other half of the dialogue made deliberately inaccessible given that it is shown as "(Inaudible)". This is an extreme example of the type of uninformed choice discussed earlier. Coupled with the shift of control to a new character, the player's feeling of control over the game is completely undermined by this sequence of choices.

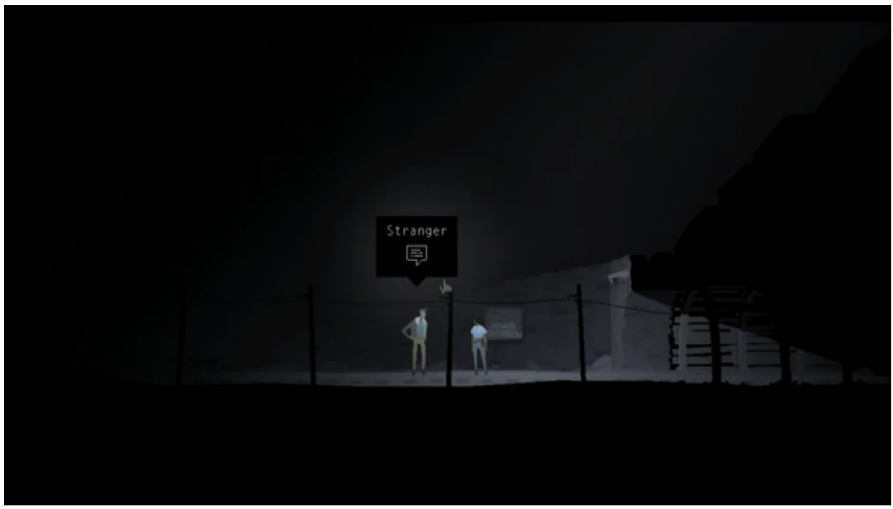

Figure 2. The main character presented as a stranger.

The sense of defamiliarization is further emphasized when Conway enters the scene. The player is given the option to talk to Conway, with the "talk" icon above his head labeled "Stranger" (see Figure 2). It is very unsettling to have the character you've been identifying with for the past two scenes suddenly referred to as a stranger. After several rounds of dialogue, by which point the player has become somewhat accustomed to the new arrangement, control is abruptly switched back to Conway. This unexpected switching of the locus of control happens a number of times throughout the game, foregrounding the arbitrariness of the player's identification with any particular character.

Narrating the Game

The defamiliarizing of dialogue choices and switching of control between characters becomes even more pronounced in Act II. In Scene IV, Shannon and Conway arrive at the "Museum of Dwellings", where they hope to find a doctor to cure Conway's leg, which was injured in the Elkhorn Mine. Here, the player retains control over Conway's movement and choice of what to interact with, but the actual conversations are quite different from anything encountered so far in the game.

The scene begins in a large, cavernous space containing a number of houses, each of which is inhabited. The player seems to be controlling Conway, as you can move him around the space, and nearby characters and objects, such as Shannon, Conway's dog and objects in the museum, have the familiar "look" or "talk" icons. However, as soon as you click on one of these, this by-now familiar experience becomes unfamiliar. For example, choosing to talk to Conway's dog results in the following dialogue sequence:

> THOMAS: Oh yeah, he was talking to his dog. Guy was a weirdo.
>
> [MUSEUM STAFF: What did he say?]
> [MUSEUM STAFF: Doesn't seem that weird.]

What immediately comes across as strange here is that the actions you are having Conway perform are being described, in the past tense, as part of a conversation between two unknown people. To make it even weirder, you, as the player, are able to choose the "Museum Staff" character's responses.

This form of interaction continues throughout the scene, with every action you take described by means of dialogue between various characters, including the museum staff and the residents of the houses in the museum. As you have Conway examine each of the houses in the museum, a dialogue is shown between the inhabitant of that building and the museum staff, and you are able to choose what the museum staff says in reaction to the residents' testimony. As each resident describes his or her encounter with Conway, Conway acts out those actions without the player issuing any commands. The immediate effect of this shift in control and interaction style is a distancing between the player and Conway. You no longer feel in control of Conway's actions, which raises the question of whether you ever were actually in control of Conway or of any of the events in the game.

However, the defamiliarization goes a step further. At certain points,

the dialogue choices presented to the player seem to be allowing you to indirectly choose what happens to Conway in a very unusual manner. For example, while Conway is exploring the resident named Flora's house, Flora asks you (as the "museum staff") if you want to hear a strange story. If you agree, Flora begins to tell you about how Conway told her that he went into the basement of her house. At this point, you are presented with the following choices:

> MUSEUM STAFF: That cabin doesn't have a basement.
>
> [FLORA: He said he found a staircase in a closet.]
> [FLORA: He said he found a secret door in the floor.]
> [FLORA: He said he dug through the ground to get there.]

Unexpectedly, your locus of control is shifted to Flora, and you now seem to be deciding what happens to Conway (or more accurately what happened to Conway, as these choices are presented in the past tense). Having just been given the sense that you cannot control what happens to Conway, now you are once again being shown that you can.

This interaction continues, reaching a point where Flora tells the museum staff that Conway came back outside, said goodbye, and they didn't talk any more. At this point Conway does, in fact, come outside, acting out what was said in the conversation, and there is no longer an option to speak to Flora. Throughout this sequence, there is a strange sense that you are controlling Conway, but at one step removed. The feeling here is that rather than playing the game, you are narrating the game.

Blurring the Boundaries of the Form

This sense that you are narrating rather than playing the game shows how defamiliarization, in addition to drawing attention to the form, is also blurring the boundaries of the form. Despite this, Kentucky Route Zero Acts I and Act II are still largely grounded in the conventions of the point-and-click adventure genre. It is in Limits and

Demonstrations, the first of two "intermissions" that were released after each of the first two acts in the game, that the boundaries of the form are more clearly being pushed.

In Limits and Demonstrations the player controls a woman named Emily as she, together with her friends Bob and Ben, wander through a virtual exhibition of artworks created by the fictitious artist Lula Chamberlain. Interestingly, these three friends seem to be the mysterious game players whom Conway encountered in the basement at the start of Act I. One of the works that the player encounters is "Overdubbed Nam Jun Paik installation, in the style of Edward Packer" (see Figure 3). The visual representation of this piece is similar to the original work, Random Access (Paik, 1963/2000). The interaction is also described as similar:

> BEN: Oh, I read about this one. It's interactive.
>
> **[EMILY: How does it work?]**
> [EMILY: What is it about?]
>
> BEN: It's a bunch of old tape, and you run this tape playback head along it. And just listen to the recordings, I guess?
>
> BOB: Lets try it out. I think you start in the middle.

Figure 3. Overdubbed Nam Jun Paik installation, in the style of Edward Packer.

However, the interaction takes place entirely through text. As Emily instructs Ben to move the playback head, Lula's voice is "heard" (in text) describing a cluttered office in which she is sitting, with two other characters, Donald and Joseph, standing in the hallway. This is followed by a list of options:

> (A synthetic voice recording, spliced awkwardly into the tape, lists out options in monotone.)
>
> COMPUTER: To examine cards, rotate thirty degrees and advance seven inches. To leave room, rotate seventeen degrees and advance four inches. To activate computer, rotate two hundred degrees and advance fifteen inches.
>
> [EMILY: Examine cards.]
> [EMILY: Leave room.]
> [EMILY: Activate computer.]

This is a fascinating mash-up of Random Access with, as the title of the work suggests, a Choose Your Own Adventure book. The "Edward Packer" mentioned in the title is clearly a reference to

Edward Packard, one of the pioneering authors of the Choose Your Own Adventure series of books.

As you explore the various options available, you discover that by activating the computer and inserting the "caves" punch card, you are navigating yet another layer of narrative, this time describing Donald, Joseph and Lula's exploration of a cave system in the vicinity of the Zero. Standing at the entrance to the cave, they hesitate, and Emily is given the option to enter the caves:

> COMPUTER: To enter the cave, rotate sixty-five degrees left and advance four inches.
>
> [EMILY: Enter the cave.]
> [BOB: That's the only choice?]
>
> BEN: Yeah, that's the end of that one.

As with many choices in the game, this is clearly not a real choice, and leads to a dead end. A bit later, when the characters realize that there are no other options, you are presented with the option to cheat, something anyone who has read a Choose Your Own Adventure book has been tempted to do:

> BEN: I don't think we ever reached this long one at the top here. Is it cheating to skip over here?
>
> **[EMILY: I won't tell a soul.]**
> [EMILY: Maybe we missed something. Can we skip back a bit?]
> [EMILY: Let's just stop here.]

(Bob moves the playback head to another strip of tape.)

What is interesting here is the ways in which several nested interactions are being conveyed to the player, all of which are commenting on the nature of the adventure game as an interactive form by foregrounding the player's lack of control and the notion

of following or breaking rules. Adding to the complexity of this sequence is the fact that the interaction with this fictional artwork is conveyed through text, within a graphical point-and-click adventure game, set within an art exhibition showing works by a fictional artist that are clearly remixes of actual new media artworks. All of this serves to defamiliarize the experience, drawing the player's attention to these many layers of interaction and the assumptions upon which the interaction is built.

Conclusion

Through the use of a series of defamiliarizing devices, the designers of Kentucky Route Zero question the basic aspects of what constitutes a game: the interaction. By continually introducing new, unfamiliar variations on common gameplay mechanics and interaction styles, the game makes the player very aware of the form itself. This approach is analogous to the use of poetic language to make the familiar unfamiliar, something that Shklovsky (1965) sees as separating poetry and literature from "everyday" language. Similarly, this type of interaction can be considered to be a type of poetic interaction, interaction that draws attention to the form of a game, and encourages reflection on the assumptions underlying interaction and gameplay.

In Kentucky Route Zero the content and form of the work are closely integrated, working together to convey a particular, unusual experience of the world. By tightly coupling content and interaction, and drawing attention to the ways in which the interaction itself conveys meaning, the use of defamiliarization does not frustrate but instead, as Shklovsky says, serves to "recover the sense of life" in the world around us, encouraging the player to appreciate, and see as new, an old and familiar form, in this case the point-and-click adventure game. As with poetry and literature, it is this use of defamiliarization that separates a game such as Kentucky Route Zero from other, more conventional and established approaches to interaction. It is this use of poetic interaction that draws the player's attention to, as Juul and Norton (2009) describe it, "the beauty of the activity itself."

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