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Master's Thesis

“But Maybe They Should Feel  
Lost”: Magical Literariness in  
the Computer Game *Kentucky  
Route Zero*



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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the poetical interplays of the contemporary magical realist computer game *Kentucky Route Zero*. Through the notion of literariness coined by the Russian formalists, the work centers on the ways the game operates with the established conventions of magical realism. The theory of intermediality, with its concepts of media modalities, media representation and transmediation, introduced by Lars Elleström, foregrounds the underlying connectedness of *Kentucky Route Zero* with older media – early instances of computer games – and with the discussed literary style. Text-world theory, outlined by Alison Gibbons and Sarah Whiteley, allows locating and analyzing the idiosyncratic presence of magical realism in the game.

As the analysis shows, the realization of magical realism in the game performs a subversive role by destabilizing the aspects of linearity and progression, important for the computer games of the same genre. This, in turn, composes an overarching theme of *Kentucky Route Zero* – nostalgia; the theme that runs both through the stylistic features of the game and through its content.

## Key words

video games, intermediality, magical realism, literariness, text-worlds, nostalgia

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# 1 Introduction

What happens if a computer game acquires literary qualities? If the aesthetics of literary conventions enter the aesthetics of the computer game, is it then possible to talk about the computer games' literariness? *Kentucky Route Zero* (2019), a magical realist adventure game in five acts and four interludes, poses these questions, challenging boundaries between literary texts and video games, which allegedly separate these types of media today. On one hand, *Kentucky Route Zero* represents aesthetics of text-based adventure games – story-driven instances of early computer games whose popularity bloomed in the 70s and 80s. On the other hand, *Kentucky Route Zero* operates with the poetics of a literary convention in which literariness is encoded – the convention of magical realism. Magical realism, in turn, defamiliarizes the *Kentucky Route Zero*'s representation of the genre of adventure games, which makes it stylistically closer to the genre of interactive fiction.

*Kentucky Route Zero*, through representation of older media – adventure games – and through representation of older technologies, transmediates the poetics of magical realism, encouraging intermedial analysis. Péter Kristóf Makai argues that video games appear to be “especially receptive to (and generative of) intermedial influences” (78). Since games seem to imitate – “remediate other media types, as well as the sensorially simulating, viscerally emotional experiences it generates and corporeally involving performances it requires of its players” (78), they exercise the use of all modalities (79). The model of modalities developed by Lars Elleström elicits how the interaction with the media, its materiality, spatiality, and temporality, affects our senses and informs meaning making. In addition, Elleström writes: “The concept of media modalities also accounts . . . for how media are differently entangled in each other, and in which respects media may not be contained by or mixed with other media” (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 53). Along with the concept of media modalities, in this thesis, I will work with the concepts of media representation and media

transmediation. Together, they appear to be prominent in regards to closely examining the connection and disconnections between *Kentucky Route Zero* and magical realism, as well as between *Kentucky Route Zero* and text-based adventure games.

In this thesis, I treat magical realism as a literary style that strives to destabilize our established understanding of space and time. Having its roots in the art of the Weimar republic, magical realism in literature constructs impossible plural spatialities to undermine the notions of temporality, subverting the readerly expectations. As Faris Lois Zamora rightly points out, while “conventional narrative realism constructs the illusion of a fictional world that is continuous with the readers”, “magical realism foregrounds the illusionary status of its fictional world by requiring that the reader follow its dislocations and permutations” (500). Consequently, the notions of defamiliarization, estrangement, subversion of readerly expectations all originate in the works of the Russian formalists and could be gathered under the term “literariness”. The Russian formalists were seeking to define the properties and functions of poetical language and what makes it different from the language of everyday communication. Viktor Shklovsky, for instance, defines literariness as an artistic device of estrangement (6). According to Shklovsky, the language of poetry strives to make our understanding of the work more difficult and our perception prolonged, which is in opposition to the automatic language of habitual communication. In short, it is literariness what makes adventure games different from interactive fiction. What makes *mimesis* different from *poesis*.

*Kentucky Route Zero* shares particular similarities with a pioneering adventure game *Colossal Cave Adventure*, also known as *Adventure* (1974). Both take place in Kentucky; both offer the cave exploration; both foreground the importance of text as the way to interact with the world of the game. But stylistically, *Kentucky Route Zero* is closer to the genre of interactive fiction. *Adventure* was purely text-based – the game did not have graphics and

animation, and the world of the game was presented merely through text (Salter 23). The player had to interact with the game through “typing [simple] verb commands”, such as “go north” (23). It was also a story-driven game: “the game progresses through narrative events, moving toward a goal or conclusion” (21). As it is common for all adventure games, “the progress is inhibited not [only] by enemies to be fought but [also] by puzzles to be solved, whether those puzzles involve sneaking past guards, finding a key, or finishing tasks for a character in order to learn a vital clue” (5).

Interactive fiction appeared as a creative alternative to text-based adventure games. Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce write that interactive fiction have “matured beyond adventure games” due to the “poetic interplays” that the works of interactive fiction are interested in (46-47). Whereas it could be said that adventure games were based on traditional texts of literature, interactive fiction might be considered as the continuation of experimental literature in print, borrowing aesthetics from not-conventional texts. Loss Pequeño Glazier in his book on digital poetics describes mimetic as texts that prioritize “narrative, plot, anecdotal re-telling of human experiences, logical descriptions, chronological sequences of events, a reliance on factual information”.<sup>1</sup> As Glazier notices, the language of these texts is often “transparent (or at most tinted)”, concluding that “such texts often base their authority on the foundation of the authority of semantic meaning” (47). In contrast, poetic texts of interactive fiction, as Katherine N. Hayles points out, attempt to “disrupt traditional notions of stable subjectivities and ego-centered discourses” (17).

Several scholars pinpoint the same. Espen J. Aarseth categorizes interactive, hypertext fiction as the subclass of ergodic literature – the term which comprises all literary works that require non-trivial efforts to traverse it (1). Aarseth, analyzing Joyce’s *afternoon*, locates non-

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<sup>1</sup> Glazier does not use the term “mimetic”. Instead, he talks about “non-innovative” literary texts. My choice to replace non-innovative techniques with mimetic techniques is motivated by the desire to move away from any evaluative statements.

conventional literary techniques that *afternoon* utilizes: “the metonymic mixing of fragments and genres, self-commentary and intrusions by the ‘author’, typographical variation, metaleptic breaks”, as well as “modernist devices of jump, fragment, split perspectives, multiple threads, uncertain causalities, *écriture labyrinthine*” (Aarseth 86-87). Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce also denote hypertext fiction as the “continuation of the modern ‘tradition’ of experimental literature in print” (44). They emphasize the influence of Borges’s story - “The Garden of Forking Paths” - on hypertext aesthetics. According to them, the short story, rejecting linearity, negating time, taking up the shape of a labyrinth, becomes suitable to be “translat[ed] into the computer’s writing space” (46). The text of the short story is already a game, which subversive, metatextual nature “calls into question the finite, fixed character of writing or print” (46).

Therefore, interactive fiction strives to renegotiate the very process of “mimetic” writing, to surpass “the transparency” of written language and overrule “the authority of semantic meaning”, adopting techniques from non-conventional literary texts (Glazier 47). *Kentucky Route Zero*, following its interactive fiction predecessors, is also interested in alienating and estranging techniques. It firmly adheres to the aesthetic of magical realism – a literary style which is known for its subversive nature. Therefore, it must suffice to say that literary conventions, travelling through media borders, and landing themselves, for instance, in a video game, also bring along their distinctive aesthetics and endow new media with them.

What does literariness give to *Kentucky Route Zero*? As I stated earlier, the game represents the genre of text-based adventure games – it imitates and references them. What makes adventure games distinct (and probably all conventional games in general) is the sense of progression. The player of the adventure game is expected to advance further in the story by completing quests, solving puzzles, fighting monsters and collecting items – all for the



purpose to finish the game with the best outcome possible. However, magical realism defamiliarizes this representation. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, the principle of progression is undermined through the special use and arrangement of magical realist poetics. The game manages to negate the concept of linear progression by evoking the feeling of being lost, disoriented.<sup>2</sup> As one of the characters of *Kentucky Route Zero* imparts - “[m]aybe they should feel lost” (Act II, *KRZ*).

This distinctive effect is achieved through what Rawdan Wilson in his work on the fictional space of magical realism defined as “plural worldhood” (227). In *Kentucky Route Zero*, stories include stories, dreams evoke dreams, memories contain memories, old technologies represent other technologies, referenced literary texts meet other literary texts. In short, the game conjures the seemingly endless maze of fictional worlds which overlap and somehow extend each other. Thus, rather than progressing *further* in the game, the player of *Kentucky Route Zero* immerses *deeper* into the bewildering, mesmerizing, ambiguous dream-like world that comprises other worlds: linear time is negated.

This kind of multiplicity of fictional spaces/worlds and negation of time compose the overarching theme of *Kentucky Route Zero* – nostalgia. Svetlana Boym writes that “nostalgia is a yearning for a different time - the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (xv). She also adds that the “object of romantic nostalgia must be beyond the present space of experience, somewhere in the twilight of the past or on the island of utopia where time has happily stopped, as on an antique clock” (13). While *Kentucky Route Zero* does not picture the object of nostalgia itself and does not portray “the island of utopia”, it strongly emphasizes their absence: through characters’ dreams and their memories.

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<sup>2</sup> “Lost” here is not to be confused with immersed.

Thus, the plurality of worlds helps to establish the oneiric tone of continuous recollection and dreaming. The game refuses time and negates progress; and so does nostalgia.

Importantly, *Kentucky Route Zero* as a game is nostalgic. “Media”, writes Katherina Niemeyer, can be “nostalgic for themselves, their own past, their structures and contents” (7). This type of media strives to imitate “older aesthetics” to translate the “yearning for older media and their period” (11). According to Dominic Schrey, in transition to the digital some sense of authenticity that analog media had has been lost, which enunciated the yearning for older forms of expression. Mary Anne Doane concurs that “what is lost in the move to the digital is the imprint of time, the visibility of degradation of the image” (Doane 117 qtd in Schrey 35). This when the concept of analog nostalgia comes to the fore. Schrey defines it as the “digital remediation of analogue aesthetics within the digital” (32). “In this regard,” concludes Schrey, “analogue nostalgia as an aesthetic practice is the paradoxical attempt to preserve the decay”. When digital media adopt the aesthetic of analog media, creating the space of “virtual ruins” and “simulating the process of aging” (35), they try to re-enchant “an object through aesthetic defamiliarizations as it is characterized by the deliberate imperfection” (34).

*Kentucky Route Zero* is not only a maze of stories. It is also a museum of older media. The game, by not only indexically representing (by which I mean indicating the period of the 70s and 80s), but also adopting the structures of older media, emphasizes the shift in technological progress, gap between now and then, unveiling what Doane named as “the imprint of time” (117). All the referenced or imitated games, be it text-based adventure games, choose-your own adventure stories as well as represented obsolete technologies constitute together virtual ruins that the conventions of magical realism defamiliarize and reenchant. Older media in the game serve as loci for collective and individual memory,

opening, through their poetical malfunctions, portals to multiple otherworlds – to the worlds of unending recollections in which time, borrowing Boym’s words, “has stopped” (13).

How to approach the analysis of this world multiplicity and negation of time in the computer game? Marie-Laure Ryan, in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* addresses the Possible World Theory to describe relations of fictional worlds and reality (70). Although her discussion might have analytical potential, it will not be adopted in my thesis, because the oppositions between possible worlds, real worlds, and impossible worlds, which make up the basis of Possible World Theory, are not in the focus of my analysis. However, her understanding of the concept of texts-as -games, which, according to her, do not follow the mimetic principle, might compliment my discussion of poetics of the analyzed computer game (Ryan 118, 123, 126). Instead, I intend to rely on the Text-World theory introduced by Alison Gibbons and Sara Whiteley in their work on contemporary stylistics. In particular, the concepts of world-switching (225) and ontological distance between modal fictional worlds (229) will help me to understand the worldhoods of *Kentucky Route Zero*, relationships between them, as well as the effect their multiplicity and oscillation between them produce.

It is also worth noticing that *Kentucky Route Zero*, despite exhibiting analytical potential for literary studies, game studies, intermedial studies, and media studies has been relatively overlooked by the academic community. Overall, there are three papers that discuss the game. Daniel Vella looks at how *Kentucky Route Zero* constructs and utilizes figure-player relations. Serada Alesha explored the connection of *Kentucky Route Zero* with David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks*. Interestingly, Alex Mitchel’s approach to *Kentucky Route Zero* appears to be very similar to mine: addressing Shklovsky’s discussion of poetic language and defamiliarization, Mitchel analyzes several episodes of the game in which familiar gets defamiliarized. Mitchel, however, does not talk about the connection of the game with

magical realist conventions – magical realism is mentioned only once (Mitchell 167). Nor does he talk about multiplicity of fictional worlds and negation of time as the way to defamiliarize the represented genre of text-based adventure game and convey the nostalgic narrative. To a certain extent, my research could be considered as the continuation and extension of the discussion started by Mitchell.

Thus, in this thesis, I will analyze how the computer game *Kentucky Route Zero*, operating with the poetic conventions of magical realism, negates the notion of time and progress through multiplication of fictional worlds and transgression between them, which feeds into the central nostalgic theme of the game. To do that, in section 2, I will address the concepts of intermedial studies to create the terminological basis for locating the connections between magical realism and *Kentucky Route Zero*, as well as adventure games and *Kentucky Route Zero*. Section three will be devoted to magical realism. In the first subsection, I intend to briefly address the history of the style, while in the second subsection, I will describe poetical elements of magical realism and discuss literariness as its aesthetic category. In section 4, the episodes of the game will be analyzed.

## 2 Intermedial studies

Before moving on to main theoretical ideas of intermedial studies, I find it necessary to introduce their basic terminology. The definitions of concepts of media products, qualified media types, the model of media modalities, as well as media representation and transmediation appear to be essential for the subsequent section devoted to the analysis of the game.

### 2.1 Intermediality: Basic Concepts

First of all, *Kentucky Route Zero* – is a media product: “a specific communicative object or event”, similar to “a Penguin copy of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, an article on global warming in *The Guardian*.” (Bruhn and Schirmacher 4). Secondly, media products could be

classified as different qualified media types, aspects of which are formed by conventions (Elleström, *Transmediations* 9). “When we speak of the news media, the arts, or genres such as the novel and the documentary”, Bruhn and Schirrmacher argue, “we are talking about media types in a way that is qualified and is defined by context, convention and history and by our experience of many individual media products” (4). A computer game is a specific qualified media type that is different from the qualified media type of, for example, a literary text or a film. Furthermore, computer games that adopt mimetic techniques and computer games that employ poetic techniques are also different qualified media types: they have different conventions, employ different aesthetics and techniques of storytelling, and, most importantly, serve different purposes. In short, they have different qualifying aspects.

Elleström distinguishes the contextual qualifying aspects and operational qualifying aspects. The contextual qualifying aspects deal with “forming media types on the grounds of historically and geographically determined practices, discourses and conventions” (*Beyond Media Borders* 60). Social practices, geographical location, political situation might dictate the use of certain media types, as well as their qualities. Operational qualifying aspects, in turn, help to categorize media types according to their “claimed or expected communicative tasks”. Particular media products tend to be grouped together because “they are known to have certain purposes and functions. . . . What they could or should achieve” (61). Strictly speaking, a stand-up performance is expected to be amusing, while a horror movie should be scary (62). It is worth noticing that the division between operational and contextual qualifying aspects is far from being strict. As Elleström explains: “[T]he communicative functions of a media type often arise, become gradually accepted or disappear at certain moments in history and in certain socio-cultural circumstances” (63). For example, the qualifying aspects of magical realism, which I will discuss in the next section, have been informed by geographical situation and political discourses. The literary style born in Latin

America stood up against the Western literary domination and its obsession with the practices of realism. Destabilizing and estranging techniques of magical realism, its poetics, its literariness were meant to undermine that domination.

## 2.2 Media Modalities

Another important concept of intermedial studies, is the concept of media modalities. In general terms, a model of media modalities strives to define “the categories of basic media traits” (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 46). Media modalities aim to describe the experience of interaction with the specific medium, and, most importantly, similarities and dissimilarities between the experiences of interactions with different media. Bruhn and Schirmacher also add that “being aware of media modalities helps us to understand what we are actually doing when we communicate and interact with media products” (Bruhn and Schirmacher 20). Elleström introduces four types of media modalities: material modality, “the latent corporeal interface of the medium” (*Media Borders* 17); sensorial modality, which describes our physical perception through senses; spatio-temporal modality that “structure[s]” our “sensorial perception” of the “material interface” according to “experiences and conceptions of space and time”; and, at last, the semiotic modality that is based on the Pearce’s three-concepts model of meaning-making: “icon”, “index”, and “symbol” (21). It is worth noticing that their presentation here is not stipulated by the chronological order – they are all interdependent and work simultaneously.

Elleström argues that “[f]or something to acquire the function of a media product, it must be material in some way, understood as a physical matter or phenomenon” (*Beyond Media Borders* 46). Describing the material modality would require exploring the reasons certain material objects can be used as “an interface of communication”, for example, “a page in a book and a screen of an electronic device” (Bruhn and Schirmacher 20).

Consequently, having materiality means being in some way present in time and space, which also means being able to “be perceived by one or more of four senses to reach the mind and trigger semiosis” (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 49). Communication would never take place if it was not transmitted through our senses (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 21). The very existence of media products would be impossible if these media products could not be “grasped by senses” (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 49). Analyzing sensorial modality would require paying attention towards how hearing or/and seeing or/and feeling carry out the meaning making in the specific media product.

As was stated earlier, the perception always takes place in space and time (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 21). Even though all media products exist in four-dimensional world, which includes the properties of width, height, depth, and time, some of them might be more spatial or more temporal (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 48). As an example, images are considered as spatial objects (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 21), however, it goes without saying that we need time to perceive it. The example of temporal event would be music (22). And yet – the process of listening to music always takes place in space.

Elleström discusses three levels of spatiality and three levels of temporality that might elucidate the spatiotemporal characteristics of certain media. He distinguishes “space as a trait of the interface of the medium. . . ; space as a fundamental aspect of all cognition; space as an interface aspect of what the medium represents” (*Media Borders* 20). The latter is the case of virtual space. Analogously, there are three levels of temporality: “time as a trait of the medium; time as a necessary condition of all perception; time as an interpretive aspect of what the medium represents” (21). The latter is the case of virtual time. These levels of temporality and spatiality can be helpful when investigating the tensions and discrepancies between real time that is necessary to interact with the medium and virtual time which the

medium represents, as well as between real space which the medium occupies and virtual space that the medium represents.

The last modality, semiotic modality, requires an interpretation of information gathered from material, sensorial and spatiotemporal modalities. Elleström denotes the semiotic modality as “the frame for understanding representation”, whereas other three modalities appear to describe pre-semiotic processes of mediation (*Beyond Media Borders* 49). Bruhn and Schirmmacher write: “The material, sensorial and spatiotemporal qualities of media products provide information that we understand to represent something else” (22). Thus, it is in semiotic modality where meaning-making resides. Elleström builds the understanding of semiotic modality based on Charles Sanders Peirce’s system of signification that takes place through icons, indices and symbols. Icons signify based on the principle of similarity: the picture of a duck would be iconic because it resembles a bird in real life (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 23). Indices signify based on the principle of contiguity, indicating that something has been present at certain point of time. Thus, a footprint of a duck would be an index. Symbols signify based on the conventions and habits. The most obvious example is language. Therefore, a word “Duck” would be symbolic. Importantly, Bruhn and Schirmmacher observe that “the three kinds of relations – iconic, indexical and symbolic – are present in all kinds of signs, even if one of them might be more prominent” (23). “Intermedial relations”, they continue, “often exploit the ambiguity of signs, that is, the possibility of relating in multiple ways to different objects” (24). For instance, a black and white photo in the movie might be both indexical and symbolic. It is more indexical in relation to the movie if it indicates the period the movie takes place in through establishing relations between past and present. It would be more symbolic if the picture played a role of a visual metaphor that needed to be interpreted by the viewers.



## 2.3 Media Combination, Media Transformation, and Transmediation

Intermedial studies distinguish two types of intermedial phenomena: media combination and media transformation (Bruhn and Schierrmacher 103). Media combination and media transformation tilt into the juxtaposition between diachronic and synchronic perspectives, the taxonomies that were borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure's differentiation of the two wings of linguistics. In brief, media combination would adopt a synchronic perspective which is interested in analyzing media at the certain moment of history, while diachronic perspective would focus on media transformation, paying attention to changes occurred in time, also considering "preceding and subsequent media" (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 73). The definition of media transformation should be understood as "all kinds of processes in which the form or content of one media type is reconstructed and thus transformed by another media type" (Bruhn and Schierrmacher 104). Despite this division, the juxtaposition between synchronic and diachronic perspectives, between media combination and media transformation, is not rigid. To analyze literariness as an aesthetic quality in the computer game would require analyzing both media combination (how literariness is realized in the given media product using its media specific means) and media transformation (what has been changed, how literariness has been transformed).

Intermedial scholars also tend to recognize two types of media transformation: transmediation and media representation. According to Bruhn and Schierrmacher, transmediation "reconstructs meaning that was previously mediated by another media type" (104). Elleström characterizes transmediation as "repeated mediation through another technical medium" (Elleström, *Transmediations* 4). Ana Cláudia Munari Domingos and José Arlei Rodrigues Cardoso note that in the process of transmediation, previous media do not appear - what appears is "their content, which is transmediated – adapted to the new media" (92). Said otherwise, "frames", the signification of the presence of another medium, "[are]

not included in the transfer from one medium to another” (Elleström, *Transmediations* 5).

The phenomenon of transmediation is often exemplified with the process of adaptation, “when the novel is turned into a film” (Bruhn and Schierrmacher 104).

Regarding the phenomenon of media representation, Bruhn and Schierrmacher denote it as when “one medium represents the characteristics of another medium” (104). Elleström writes that media representation is simply “representation [in a medium] of another medium” (*Transmediations* 4). For example, “when film represents a theater performance” (5). What makes media representations different from transmediation, according to Elleström, is that “the frame is included in the transfer from one medium to another” and that this frame can be distinguished (Elleström, *Transmediations* 5, Domingos and Cardoso 91). By interacting with the medium, we understand that there is another medium inside of this one. For Domingos and Cardoso, however, it would be just one type of media representation.

They argue that there are different types of media representations: simple media representations and complex media representations. Simple media representations are to be understood in the same way Elleström defines the concept. One can perceive the difference between representing medium and represented medium. A photo hanging on the wall of characters’ house in a movie would be a simple media representation. In the case of complex media representations, however, media representations “enter the structure of the represented media product, producing meaning from the qualities of other media” (Domingos and Cardoso 98). The frame between the represented medium and the representing medium is impossible to discern: “represented media characteristics dissolve in the representing media product” (Domingos and Cardoso 91). At this point, the parallels between complex media representations and transmediation become evident, pointing to the ambiguity in distinction between media representation and transmediation.

Cardoso and Domingo admit that transmediation “can often function as complex representations of media” (104). Bruhn and Schierrmacher point out that these two phenomena are, actually, “two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other” (105). This, the phenomenon of ekphrasis, often discussed in the context of media transformation, could be viewed both as an example of the transmediation (Bruhn et al. 148) and the media representation (Ellestrom, *Transmediations* 7). Accentuating the origins of ekphrasis in rhetoric school of Ancient Greece and Rom (the term used to define “the art of describing a work of art or other things with *energeia*, with *vividness*”), Bruhn et al. discuss ekphrasis in the light of relationship between the source medium and the target medium, emphasizing that they should belong “to different media types that are structured differently on the level of the semiotic modality (Bruhn et al. 148). For example, “poems representing paintings”, or filmic qualities of a written text or poetical qualities of a film would be the case of ekphrasis (Elleström, *Beyond Media Borders* 82).

Elleström comes to the conclusion that media representations and transmediations “might coexist”, exemplifying that “the artistic genre ekphrasis . . . is a case of qualified submedia representing other qualified media and normally”, which also “includes transmediation of media characteristics from painting to poem” (*Beyond Media Borders* 82). Thus, the choice between transmediation and media representation should depend on the focus of the analysis. If the intention is to locate contents and characteristics of one media type inside of a different medium, one should be content with the notion of media representation. If the aim is to trace the transportation of contents and characteristics from one media type to another and their transformation in the new media type, said differently – to look at “what is transferred and what is transformed” and “how transmedial concepts and structures of a source media product are reconstructed in the target media products in a

media-specific way” (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 104), – then, the notion of transmediation should be more apt for the analysis.

To partly reiterate my thesis statement, I argue that *Kentucky Route Zero* represents text-based adventure games (complex media representation) and older technologies (simple media representation). However, the literary conventions of magical realism are transmediated within these media representations. “The concepts and structures” of one qualified media type – magical realist texts – are “reconstructed” and “transformed” in a different qualifying media type – the computer game (Bruhn and Schirmmacher 104).

### 3 On Magical Realism

As Irene Guenther notices, the origin of the term “magical realism” trails back to the art world of the Weimar Republic (33). The term was “baptized” by the German art historian Franz Roh who introduced “Magic Realism” in his publication “Post-Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting” (34). Avoiding any definitions, Roh, nevertheless, lists characteristics that would later become the basis for the magical realist poetics. In Guenther’s words:

The world of painted objects Roh describes does not “reproduce” nature through instinct, but “recreates” it. Reality is “reconstructed” through “spiritual phenomena”....Sometimes, when the empirical no longer suffices, it “yields with astonishment before the magic of Being”. (Roh qtd in Guenther 35)

For Roh, reality is not so opposed to spiritual phenomena. Rather, the magical serves as a lens that we can use to look at reality anew.

Magic Realism is often coupled with New Objectivism, another style in art of painting that, as the Oxford Dictionary of Art describes, portrays objects that are “depicted with photographic naturalism”, but this depiction is interfered with “paradoxical elements or

strange juxtapositions” that “convey a feeling of unreality” (qtd in D’Haen 191). Hence, both Roh’s magical realism and New Objectivism talk about the transformation of reality, which either, according to Roh, is “‘reconstructed’ through ‘spiritual phenomena’ (qtd in Guenther 35) or disturbed with the presence of “paradoxical elements or strange juxtapositions” (qtd in Haen 191).

The arrival of magical realism in Latin America announced, first, the translation of Roh’s essay, and second, “the unprecedented cultural migration from Europe to the Americas”, caused by the advance of the Third Reich (Guenther 61). In Latin America, as Guenther writes “the concept was primarily seized by literary criticism and was, through translation and literary appropriation, transformed” (61). Theo L. D’Haen pinpoints that in Latin America magical realism managed to acquire its critical and subversive focus, revealing “itself as a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)” (195).

So, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier coins the term “lo real maravilloso” – the magical real - to describe literary practices that somehow revise “the generic practices of” his time “and media” (Zamora and Faris 7). Amyryll Chanady, elaborating on Carpentier’s term, stresses that it is the colonized past of the Latin American countries, their “resistance to neocolonial domination and the European philosophical delegitimation of metaphysical and epistemological paradigms”, that informed their search for alternative forms of narration (136). Zamora and Faris, addressing Chanady’s discussion of Carpentier’s “the magical real”, point out that the main characteristic of magical realist text is that mimesis, the imitation of reality, was replaced with poesis (8). Mimesis here encompasses “the basic assumptions of ...literary realism” (Zamora and Faris 6) and should be understood as an attempt to construct “the illusion of a fictional world that is continuous with the readers” (Zamora 500). Conversely, the poesis of magical realism aims to unsettle the Western materialist assumptions that “the reality is knowable, predictable, controllable” (498). The multitudes of

magical realist worlds, their “conflations” (Zamora 501), “their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness” (Zamora and Faris 6) destabilize the very idea of “experienced reality” (Zamora 500), by negating the “modernity’s basis in progressive linear history” (498).

In sum, magical realism was born in Europe, traveled to and assimilated in Latin America, and then it bloomed outside of the Latin American countries. Shannin Schroeder offers an interesting discussion on how magical realism “germinated in the United States” (59). Addressing Zamora, Schroeder writes how Borges, “a father to the movement in Latin America” referenced Ralph W. Emerson’s concept of Transcendentalism, as well as a Samuel T. Coleridge’s Romanticism (59-60). Zamora suggests that this points out to “the confluent sources of his magical realism and tie it to the nineteenth-century U.S. romance tradition” (qtd in Schroeder 60).<sup>3</sup> Thus, acknowledging aesthetical roots of magical realism in the European art and their politicized reorientation in Latin American literature, it would be beneficial to study poetics of magical realism in connection with their ideological inclinations, which now could be viewed as part of international phenomenon.

### 3.1 Components of Magical Realism

Wendy B. Faris describes five components that constitute the style of magical realism. All of them appear to be interdependent, so it would make sense to discuss some of them along each other. The first component - irreducible element of magic - encompasses “something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse” (8). These magical elements are deeply embedded in the environment of textual reality in such a way, that they are usually reported and mentioned without comments and explanations from the narrator (11). Said otherwise, extraordinary events, remaining for the readers, irrational and bizarre, are presented in the text as something

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<sup>3</sup> Coleridge was a British poet, but Zamora does not elaborate on how his writings contributed to the nineteenth-century U.S. romance tradition.

ordinary, something that does not require further elaboration, and because of this, actual ordinary things might occur as “amazing or even ridiculous” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 11). This creates a distinctive effect common for texts of magical realism: the magical is normalized (not by the characters and not for the reader), while the real is sometimes defamiliarized and presented as extraordinary (13).

The second component of magical realism would be “the presence of the phenomenal world” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 14), or, in other words, of “the-ineffable-in-between” (45). Characters inhabit the world quite similar to ours, but the permeating presence of magical, strange and unexplainable destabilizes this familiarity, evoking in the reader the unease sense of estrangement. The sense of estrangement and alienation, in turn, stems from the fantastic nature of magical realism. The term was introduced by Tzvetan Todorov in his three-sided system of genres that comprises “fantastic”, “uncanny”, and “marvelous”. While the uncanny encompasses a fictional world that does not require rewriting the laws of nature of our universe, and, hence, unusual event could be characterized as supernatural (Todorov 41), marvelous presents the world in which everything amazing and unusual is accepted, meaning, the reader does not question the presence of incredible elements. Oscillating between the two, the fantastic dwells on the feeling of hesitation and uncertainty: in the fantastic text, the reader is unable, usually due to the lack of textual information, to determine whether the amazing is an established and accepted part of the presented world - the marvelous, or it is something that destabilizes reality - the uncanny (25). This definition of the fantastic has an important bearing on understanding the conventions of magical realism. In the text of magical realism, the uncanny would encompass the recognizable world of our everyday life that gets intervened by the elements of magic. At the same time, the magical is presented as something ordinary, as if part of the reality, thus falling under the category of the marvelous.

Therefore, employing destabilization and defamiliarization as its artistic device, the text evokes “unsettling doubts” in the reader - the third component of magical realism (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 17). In text, it might be realized through what Faris calls “two-way streets”: “The ‘verbal traffic’ maneuver arranges events or objects in the text along an imaginary spectrum running from the improbable to the impossible, or, in other words, from the uncanny to the marvelous, and back again” (115). The reader questions the very nature of coexistence of different realms: the text is neither fantasy with its radically different universe (marvelous), nor is it the text of realism with the world so similar to ours, nor is it the story about the forces and powers of supernatural (the uncanny). Reiterating the previous statement, the familiar reality is destabilized by the presence of the magical which makes ordinary unordinary and unusual usual, which falls under the category of the fantastic.

The fourth and the fifth components of magical realism, merging of different realms and disruption of concepts of time and space, could also be discussed together. As was mentioned previously, the text of magical realism presents the world where magical coexists with ordinary, or how Faris puts it, “the realism [coexists with] the fantastic” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 21). Magical and the fantastic are usually presented as the space of sacred, and the characters inhabit the dimension where the worlds of life and death intersect (21-22). Merging of past and present and negation of the concept of linearity result in the disruptions of concepts of time and space (23).

On the level of text, as Faris writes, it could be exemplified with “Chinese boxes” – embedded stories within stories that play “a spatial textual game with the reader”, putting the subjectivity of each textual world into question (*Ordinary Enchantments* 124). Another instance would be mirroring: “Repeated narrative of various kinds, both intertextual and intratextual, create a narrative of hall of mirrors” that “conjure the reader into their shifting world” and evoking the feeling of the uncanny (127). Mirroring and multiple textual worlds



might establish the “oneiric optic” of magical realist text, which is important for my analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero*:

Hallucinatory magical realism, which is more often characterized by fragmentary invocations and creates difficulties in asserting which events have happened, which are imagined, and which are dreamed. . . . It is difficult to decide which elements are irreducible elements and which are visions, either waking or sleeping. This fictional magic seems almost to activate a narrative dreamwork, as it were, conflating and multiplying figures and scenarios, constituting what Gaston Bachelard calls as oneiric optic, closer to reverie than to dream but partaking of many dreamlike qualities. (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 100)

Chinese boxes and certain textual repetitions might constitute these “fragmentary invocations” in which time and space become indeterminate (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 97). This ambiguity sets up a dream-like tone of narration, making the reader experience the impossibility to understand and interpret this radical multiplicity of textual worlds.

Magical realism also disrupts the notion of identity (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 25). The style often employs defocalization – defamiliarized and destabilized multivocality that comprises “a mysterious sense of fluid identities” (25). Although Faris admits that it could be compared to shifting perspectives “in other modern and postmodern narratives” (44), “the nature and origin of narrative voice in magical realism . . . is more radically destabilized because of the presence of irreducible elements within an otherwise realistic narrative environment” (45). Defocalization seems “to report events that cannot be empirically verified” disrupting “the identification of reliable representation in narrative with ordinary human consciousness” (45). Since Faris does not posit defocalization against established narratological taxonomies, her concept remains to be open for interpretation and

might not be limited to the definition she presents in her work. In this thesis, I will use the concept of defocalization to analyze how multivocality undermines the notions of time and space, confusing “our sense of the narrative’s diegesis” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 109).

### 3.2 The Strange Treatment of Space and Time in Magical Realism

Jean-Pierre Durix writes that the text of magical realism “aims at a basis of mimetic illusion while destroying it regularly with the strange treatment of time, space, characters or what many people . . . take as the basic rules of the physical world” (qtd in Schroeder 5).

Therefore, in magical realism, linearity is negated – time and space are twisted like a Möbius ladder, “suggesting a model of how different geometries, inscribing boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, . . . superimpos[ing] themselves upon one another” (Wilson 210).

Wilson suggests that “magical realism is a term that describes the fictional spaces created by the dual inscription of alternative geometries” (225). Thus, magical realism is a literary style in which the spatial qualities are foregrounded. Referring back to intermediality, outlined in section 1, the texts of magical realism, through constructing textual spaces of alternative geometries, appear to exhibit more spatial qualities than temporal.

The question of textual space, in turn, should be addressed through the notion of textual/fictional worlds. Wilson argues that “[i]n reading, one may see not only a world in words, a world from text, but also worlds within textual world” (226). Magical realism exhausts this textual capacity to multiply textual worlds, turning it to its fundamental creative principle. Zamora also designates the plurality of textual worlds as one of the essential elements of magical realist texts. They “amplify the very conception of ‘experiences reality’ by presenting fictional worlds that are multiple, permeable, transformable” (Zamora 500). Faris adds that the plethora of textual worlds play “a spatial textual game with the reader”, putting “the subjectivity of each textual world . . . into question” (*Ordinary Enchantments*

124) . Wilson offers two types of relationships between magical realist worlds. “On the one hand”, Wilson writes, “the hybrid constructions of magical realism ensue . . . when something different from, even inconsistent with, clashes hard against ordinary in-the-actual-world experience” (Wilson 225). Rephrasing Wilson, in the first type, fictional worlds are in clear opposition to each other: the magical domain collides with the domain of the real. The second type, on the other hand, describes a more subtle relationship between fictional worlds of magical realism: “one world may lie hidden within another. . . the hybrid construction emerges from a secret, always already contained within, forming an occulted and latent dimension of the surface of the world” (225). That “occulted and latent dimension” is what Faris considers as “the-ineffable-in-between” – the incomprehensible phenomenal world whose very presence disrupts the notion of time and space; the world that makes the present face the past (*Ordinary Enchantments* 45, 21-22).

In his essay, Wilson relies a lot on post-structuralist terminology to develop an analytical approach to the multiplicity of fictional worlds in magical realism. In particular, he addresses Roland Barthes’ notion of “stereographic space”: “the space of an intertextual enchainment in which text, or sliver of a text, associates itself with, pulls into its own textual space, some other text, or textual shard” (226). Magical realist text, Wilson argues, can be explored as Barthes’s stereographic space, in which textual worlds inscribe themselves into each other: “[T]he plural worldhood of magical realism results and exemplifies the textual theory of inscriptibility: one world lies present, though hidden; within the other, just as one text lies latent within another text” (226). Wilson extends his discussion by referencing Jacques Derrida who viewed space as “the relational habitation of all sign system, and it is this, the domain of textuality, of inscriptions, that produces the “spatiality of Space”: “It is the possibility of inscriptions being reinscribed upon others, or upon each other . . . that, in Derrida’s views, generates the human notion of space” (226-227). This statement signals

further inferences. If texts of magical realism are inherently intertextual, they also become intermedial.

Jon Thiem proposes the term “textualization” to denote the capability of magical realist text merge different worlds together. What makes Thiem argumentation different from Wilson’s utilization of “stereographic space” and inscriptibility theory, is that Thiem includes the figure of a reader into his discussion (235). Thiem distinguishes two kinds of textualization: “[W]hen a reader/author/non-reader will be literally, and therefore magically, transported into the worlds of a text”, and “when the world of a text literally intrudes into the extratextual or readers’ world” (235, 236). The example of the first kind would be when a reader becomes the character in the novel he or she reads. “In Julio Cortázar’s story ‘The Continuity of Parks’”, writes Thiem “the reader of a mystery novel is, or becomes, a character, in fact the victim, in the novel he is reading” (236). Or, when the characters become so absorbed in fictional worlds, that they enter the fictional worlds within their own worlds (Don Quixote). The second kind could be exemplified with Italo Calvino’s opening to his *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*: “The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph” (qtd. in Thiem 236).

Therefore, textualization could be understood, first, as “a magical literalization” of being “totally absorbed” in the world of the story, and, second, as a radical metatextuality that translates the very process of writing (Thiem 240, 242). Both have the intention to bring to the fore the aspect of artificial construction of a literary text. Thiem concludes that “[t]extualization is arguably the paradigmatic topos of magical realism... Texts may encompass worlds and worlds may be texts, but the way they come together, clash, and fuse in a textualization violates our usual sense of what is possible” (244). In other words, textualization challenges readerly expectations and established readerly practices; it works

against automatization, which will be address in the following subsection on the concept of literariness.

While the taxonomies of intermedial studies, which I introduced in section 1, will allow me to locate the ways different texts-worlds inscribe into each other and how one world may contain the latent world of “the-ineffable-in between”, the text world theory, outlined by Gibbons and Whiteley, might be help me to understand the nature of shifting between these worlds. “Some literary works”, Gibbons and Whiteley argue, “create text-worlds which are designed to resemble the materiality of the real world, but others play with ontology and the interpretative tendencies that underpin text-world construction in order to create different effects” (231). Magical realism plays with multiplicity of text-worlds to create an estranging, defamiliarizing, oneiric effect.

Gibbons and Whiteley define text-worlds as “the conceptualizations that are evoked by the language that is used in the interaction” (222). “In Text World Theory”, they continue, “the mental representations produced during communication are referred to as ‘worlds’” (221). According to Gibbons and Whiteley, “[i]n literary discourse, language tends to be used to create remote often fictional text-worlds in the minds of readers. These text-worlds are formed through the combination of linguistic cues in the text and a reader’s inferences” (223). They distinguish two types of language cues. First, it is “[w]orld-builders . . . that specify the building blocks of a text world” (223). World-builders include time, locations, entities, objects (223). The second type is “function-advancers” (224). Their intention is to “propel the narrative forward in some way, for instance, by representing action or providing description” (224). Function-advancers include “[v]erb phrases indicating the activities or properties of the text-world entities and objects” (224). Thus, the shift in time, which becomes evident due to the world-builders cues or function-advancers cues, would usually signal a text-world switch (225).

Another important idea discussed by the scholars is the idea of “ontological relationships between worlds”, which is usually understood “in terms of proximity (closeness/remoteness): “Immediate moment of narration feels conceptually ‘closer’ to the reader, whereas the modal-worlds representing the hypothetical and unrealized contents of the narrator’s imagination feel conceptually ‘further away’” (Gibbons and Whiteley 229-231). The texts of magical realism might play, by which I mean experiment, with these ontological relationships between textual worlds. As my analysis in section 4 will illustrate, the medium can construct text-worlds that would evoke the feeling of being submerging deeper into the fabric of the story, while a different kind of text-organization would evoke the feeling of worlds’ interwovenness (mirroring).

When I say that magical realism undermines readerly expectations, or when Zamora argues that “magical realism foregrounds the illusionary status of its fictional world” (500), or when Gibbons and Whiteley write about texts that “play with ontology and the interpretative tendencies that underpin text-world construction” (231), it usually implies that the poetics of magical realism employ estrangement as its artistic device. Scott Simpkins concurs that “magic realists use what the Russian Formalists called defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become visually invisible because of their familiarity” (Scott Simpkins 150). Estrangement or defamiliarization can be construed as literariness, an aesthetic modality that constitutes the poetics of magical realist texts.

### 3.3 Literariness as an aesthetic category of magical realism

Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist and structuralist, was the first one to introduce the term on the pages of his essay “Russian Modern Poetry” published in 1921. In this work, he argues that the science about literature studies not literature per se, but rather “literariness”: the qualities of a text that make it clearly distinctive from other types of texts

(*Philologos.narod.ru*). Jakobson does not go deeper into the question. However, his later well-known and seminal work “Linguistics and Poetics” on six functions of language could be considered as a continuation of this line of reasoning. Thus, in his article, Jakobson juxtaposes referential and poetic functions of language. He states that whereas referential function strives to deliver a message to the addressee (66), poetic function dwells upon itself: language is poetic for pure sake of being poetic (69). Literariness, therefore, employs this poetic language with its aesthetic function.

The term “literariness” was picked up and developed by the group of Russian formalists. Viktor Shklovsky, for instance, in his *Theory of Prose* (1929), particularly, in the first chapter “Art as Device”, famously presents the term “estrangement” in order to describe the function of the language of poetry (6). His arguments boil down to two crucial oppositions. First, it is the opposition between poetry (art) and prose (not art).<sup>4</sup> Second, it is the opposition between automatization (recognition) and estrangement. According to Shklovsky, poetry performs a subversive role towards the language of prose, which he characterizes as habitual, economical, effortless (no effort is needed to understand the meaning) (13). In other words, it is automatic (5). The language of poetry and, by default, the language of art, aims, on the other hand, at returning “sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony” (6). In short, the purpose of the poetic language is to remove the “object from the sphere of automatized perception”, to impel us to ponder the meaning in the perplexity that estrangement induces.

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<sup>4</sup> When Shklovsky writes about prose, it is not pertained to the prose as a literary genre. Shklovsky himself extensively analyzes the passages from Leo Tolstoy’s works, for instance, a short story “Khlostomer” and a novel *War and Peace*, arguing that Tolstoy’s language of prose is, in fact, poetic because it operates with estrangement. Hence, prose language is to be understood as an everyday language of communication.

To conclude, magical realism fosters literariness – it attempts to undermine mimetic attempts to represent reality, to cancel recognition and evoke estrangement. Faris identifies five elements of magical realism, as well as the narrative techniques that implement them. Irreducible element of magic is part of the phenomenal world that merges different realms – constructs impossible spatialities and negates linear temporality, leaving readers in “the unsettling doubts”. Multiple text-worlds – embedded stories within stories (“Chinese boxes”, “oneiric optic”, “stereographic space” addressed by Wilson, “textualization” addressed by Thiem) or repetition of certain textual elements (mirroring) have been discussed here as distinctive features for magical realist texts.

## 4 Analysis

*Kentucky Route Zero* could be characterized as “hallucinatory magical realism” – the game uses “fragmentary invocations”, “conflates and multiplies figures and scenarios”, oscillates between reverie and dreaming, and “creates difficulties in asserting which events have happened, which are imagined, and which are dreamed” (Faris 100). The game’s “plural worldhood” (Wilson 227), stereographic spaces, in which referenced texts meet each other, textualization (Thiem 235-236), which blurs the distinction between the player and characters, constitute the play with textual-worlds that aims at defamiliarization of the players’ understanding of time and space. The game manages to negate the concept of progression and linearity – the player does not progress *further* in the story but immerses *deeper* into the world(s) of the game. This allows the game to convey a nostalgic theme – to translate the very process of recollection, which itself, is a resistance to the notions of progress and time (Boym xv, 13).

Furthermore, as I stated in the introduction, *Kentucky Route Zero* is an example of nostalgic media (Niemeyer 7): the game “represents the characteristics of another medium” (Bruhn and Schiermacher 104) – of early instances of adventure games – by precisely



reconstructing their aesthetics and structures. In the game, the role of the written language is foregrounded: scene descriptions, characters' monologues and dialogues, as well as choices are all presented through text. The white New Courier letters on a black background visually translate the aesthetics of first text-games as well. Hence, the structures and aesthetics of adventure games lend themselves in *Kentucky Route Zero* in such a way that they become inseparable from the representing medium. This is the case of the complex media representation (Domingos and Cardoso 92). Moreover, *Kentucky Route Zero* represents obsolete technologies with which the player might interact. This is an example of the simple media representation: "the frame of the represented" media "can be perceived" (Domingos and Cardoso 91). The obsolete technologies represented in the game are part of oneiric optic. Serving as loci for individual and collective memory, they become portals to the multiple worlds of dreams and recollections – to "the ineffable-in-between" (Faris *Ordinary Enchantments* 45), to that "latent and occulted dimension of the surface world" (Wilson 225). Thus, within these media representations – transmediation takes place. As Elleström addresses the concept, the game picks out the elements of magical realism and uses them in a new, medium-specific way, acquiring poetical qualities (*Transmediations* 5). In particular, the elements of magical realism facilitate the estrangement and poetical destabilization of the represented media.

#### 4.1 The Impossible Geometries: Towards the Spatiality of *Kentucky Route Zero*

One of the major differences between a written text and a computer game is that the game can visualize the implied space and make it interactable. While there is no doubt that literary texts can also evoke spatiality through the domain of the written language, games have more tools at their disposal. In particular, the arrangement of the implied space might be created

not only through the symbolic signs, that is language, but also through auditorial and visual attributes, affecting the player's perception in a much different way the written text would.

The game begins with the character delivery-man Conway, later joined by Shannon Marquez - an electronic technician who fixes old TVs - looking for the Zero, an enigmatic route that Conway should take to reach his destination and complete his last delivery (*KRZ*, Act I). As it becomes clear in the very beginning of the game, the Zero is not a usual highway: one can access it either by using the old TV that "catches the wrong signal" and transmits the picture of sleeping horses, or by tuning in to the radio station that transmits a "familiar, but strange" song that sounds like a horse race.

The Zero itself is the perfect example of the space of magical realism, the space in which "different geometries ... fold and refold like quicksilver, superimposing themselves upon one another" (Wilson 210). In the game, the route is represented like a circular three-dimensional tunnel countered by white stripes, which is also an imitation of early graphics of text-based adventure games. Only the part of the tunnel that the player is currently at is visible: the rest dissipates in the darkness. The player can go either clockwise or counterclockwise. Sometimes, the shapes of different objects transpire hovering above the tunnel, such as "The Crystal", "The Crow", "The TV," or "The Boat". They serve as road signs that the player can use to orient herself while traveling the Zero (see Fig. 1).

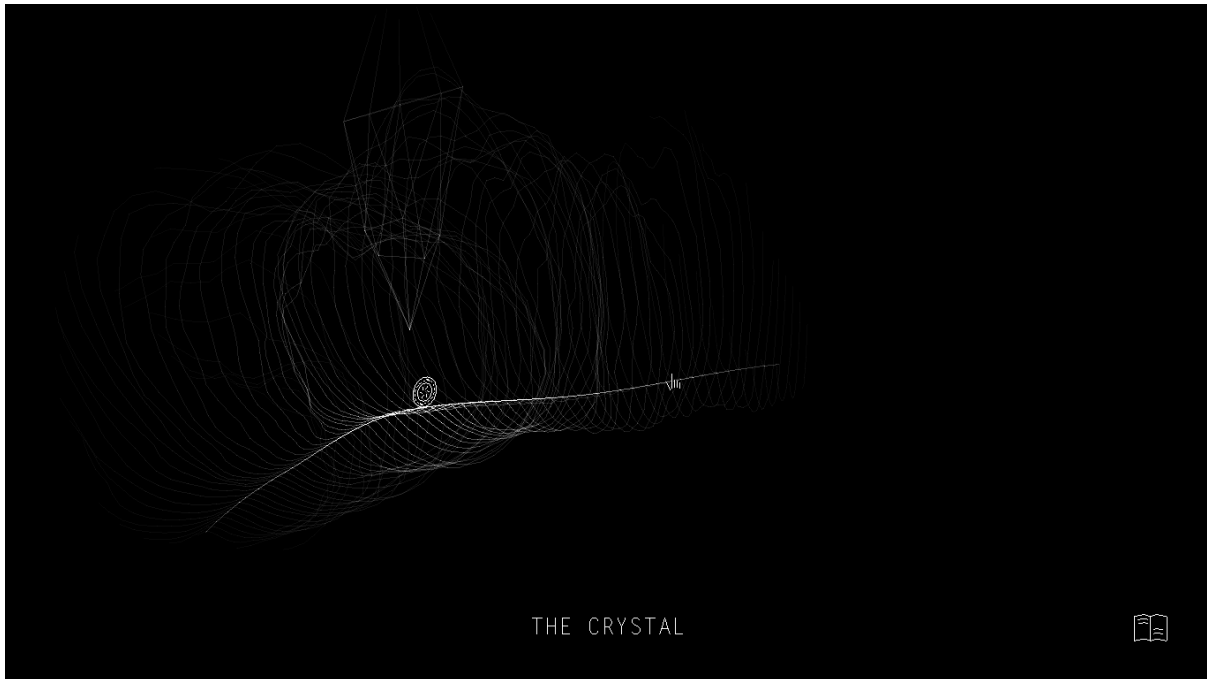


Fig. 1: “The Zero”, Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy, Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. *Steam*, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

The conventional navigation itself is impossible. If the players decide to go in circles, they will not arrive at the same point where they started their journey. For that reason, the players come into possession of pamphlets and notes with instructions of how to navigate the Zero. For example, the pamphlet of the so-called “The Bureau of Secret Tourism” gives a list of locations the player can explore while traveling the Zero. One of them is “The Dymaxion Gallery” – “[a] gallery of mislaid futures, abandoned on lonely highways as American industrial design shifted its gaze to intangible”. To get there, the pamphlet advises you to “[d]rive counter-clockwise toward the TV. When you reach the TV, drive clockwise to the antenna. Now turn around again and head just past the barn. To return to the Bureau, find the TV again, and again turn around” (“The Pamphlet of the Bureau of Secret Tourism”, *KRZ*).

Hence, this repetitiveness has an important bearing on the sensorial modality of the game. The player has to drive back and forth many times to explore all the hidden locations

of the Zero. This going in circles is a monotonous process that aims at confusing the player's visual perception of space, inducing the feeling of being lost. Furthermore, the auditorial aspect also contributes to the evocation of the sense of estrangement and defamiliarization. A never-ending and never-changing one-tone synth sound indexically marks the presence of the phenomenal world, of "the ineffable in between", creating oneiric atmosphere, a distinctive feature of magical realist texts (*Ordinary Enchantments* 45, 101). The sound conjures the sense of continuity, endowing the virtual time of the game with the illusion of stillness, which, in turn, compliments the visual aspect of the cyclical, disorienting drive.

Overall, the moving in circles constitutes the isomorphic structure of *Kentucky Route Zero*, meaning that it becomes its organizing motif. In Act I, "Museum of Dwellings", characters walk around a hangar space, looking at the exhibitions of households. In the act III, in the episode called "The Hall of the Mountain King", the characters walk on spiraling scaffolds when talking with other characters. The fourth act represents the space similar to the Zero – the Echo River that even visually resembles the countering of the enigmatic road (Fig.2). It also becomes a fundamental structure for act V, in which, controlling a black cat, the player explores the unnamed town, Conway's final destination that he never reaches, by moving inwards down a spiral path. Again, the game refuses to advance further, inviting the player to delve deeper.

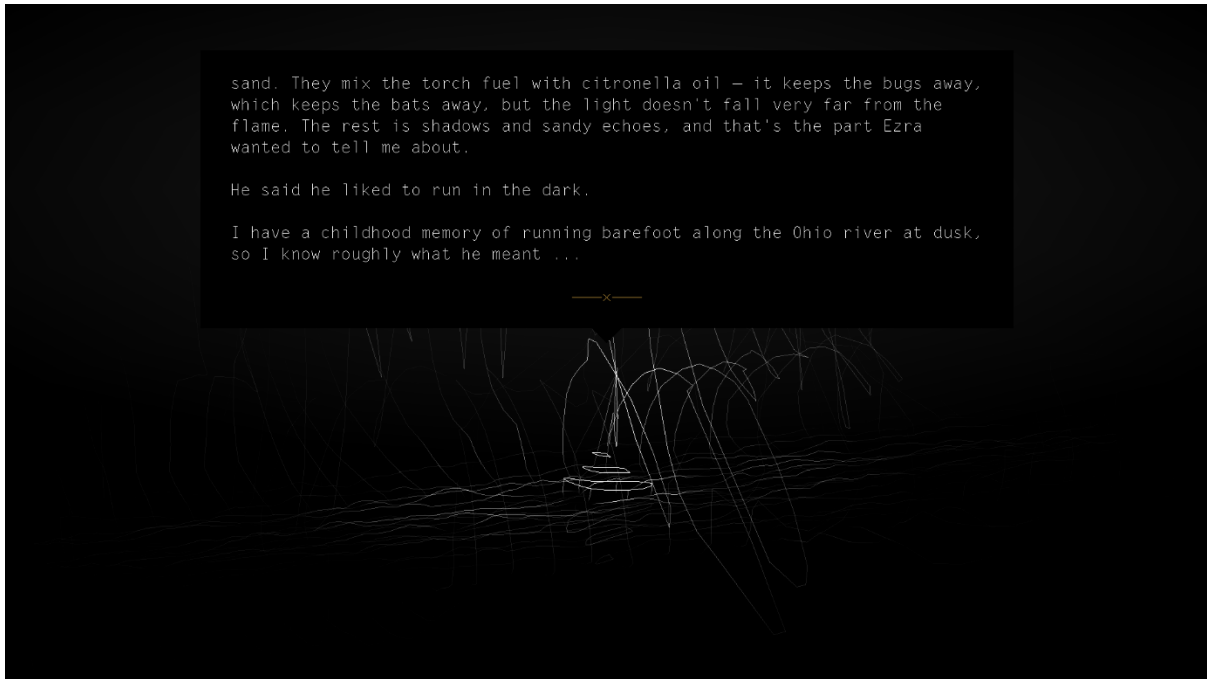


Fig. 2: “The Echo River”, Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. *Steam*, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

## 4.2 The Maze of Dreams and Recollections

The journeys down the impossible geometries always trigger dreams and recollections in the characters of the game. These recollections, in turn, comprise “fragmentary invocations” and “multiple figures and scenarios”, establishing the oneiric and nostalgic tone of narration and posing “difficulties in asserting which events have happened, which are imagined, and which are dreamed” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 100). Thus, in this subsection, I will analyze the episodes from *Kentucky Route Zero* that are prominent for the investigation of how the game conjures the indeterminate spaces and times through constructing multiple dream-like text-worlds (discussed in section 3). This, in turn, will help to understand how the aesthetics of magical realism contribute to the *Kentucky Route Zero*’s overarching intention to negate the concepts of linearity and progress, which defamiliarizes the media *Kentucky Route Zero* represents: adventure games.

#### 4.2.1 “Museum of Dwellings”: Present within Past and Recollecting Recollections

In the first act, Conway is looking for Doctor Truman to fix his leg, which he has damaged helping Shannon to explore the abandoned mines earlier in the game. Dr. Truman lives in the so-called “Museum of Dwellings”. The omnipresent Consolidate Power Co. has reclaimed the land of usual residents, forcing them to move their households to the museum – a hangar space. People still live in their houses which are also part of exhibitions, but residents do not have their land – all that is left is the inhospitable cold storage space. This juxtaposition – between home and not home – is also informed by magical realist aesthetics. The situation itself is impossible (people live in the museum), but in the game, as in the texts of magical realism, the extraordinary is presented as something ordinary, and addressing Faris’s words, the unreal phenomenon is concretized (*Ordinary Enchantments* 90).

Conway and Shannon go from one household to another, looking for Dr. Truman. The player can read the description of each household and most of the time “speak” with its dwellers. I put speak in quotation marks to emphasize that speaking itself does not take place. Shannon and Conway, in spite of being present on the screen, are removed from the dialogues themselves. Who is speaking is the staff of the museum and the dwellers, but the speaking takes place in the future, after Conway and Shannon have left.



Fig. 3 Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. Steam, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

Hence, this episode exploits the magical realist technique of defocalization that “confuses our sense of the narrative diegesis” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 109). Visually, the players are informed that Conway and Shannon are in the museum, talking with the dwellers. Yet, the text signals the impossible presence of another temporality. As it is clear from the screenshot (Fig. 3), Shannon, Conway and Blue are standing in front of the information desk at the entrance of the museum. There is no one else. The text represents the disembodied dialogue between: Thomas– “oh, yeah, he [Conway] was talking to his dog. The guy was a weirdo” – and the museum staff.

Therefore, the game attempts to confuse the player. Visually, the game evokes one temporal dimension with the presence of Conway, Blue and Shannon. The text, however, evokes a different temporal dimension, in which Conway, Blue and Shannon are not present and have already left. Borrowing Elleström’s taxonomies (*Media Borders* 20-21), it is possible to say that there is a clash between two virtual times, which create paradoxical

“proliferations and confluences of worlds” (Zamora 501). *Kentucky Route Zero*, similar to magical realist texts, “foregrounds the illusionary status of its fictional world” (500). This means that the presence of multiple virtual temporalities and spatialities could only be inferred by the very fictional nature of the represented world.

Importantly, this clash of different temporalities within one virtual space negates the principle of linearity and destabilizes the understanding of space. This is bound to the main argument of my thesis that *Kentucky Route Zero* poetically destabilizes the media representation by abolishing the notion of linear progression. Furthermore, the analyzed episode comprises stories within stories. The dialogues between the dwellers and the museum staff evoke plural text-worlds, additional layers of stories, that here could be named as impossible recollections - the dwellers retell Conway’s memories.

So, observing the households, Conway suddenly notices the familiar house. Flora, the little girl who lives there, tells the staff: “The old man asked me about the cabin. He said it looked like another house he knew, and he wanted to know where it came from. I told him nobody lived there, so he went inside. He took a long time exploring. When he came back out he told me all about it” (Act I, “Museum of Dwellings”, *KRZ*). Again, the girl narrates her encounter with Conway in the past tense, which, according to Gibbons and Whiteley, signals the creation of one text world that is ontologically distant from the very moment of narration (229-231). Furthermore, we observe Conway and Flora talking to each other, and we see how Conway enters the cabin. This is a literalization of what magical realist theorists coined as the disruption of time and space (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 25). In this episode, the past is the present, and the present is the past.

After Conway enters the house, the scene fades in, leaving on the screen just the text on the black background. This transition signals the switch to a different world, the world that is even further away from the world framed by Flora at the beginning of her story. This is the



world of Conway’s memory: Flora is recollecting her encounter with Conway, while Conway is recollecting the moment from his life. The past within the past, Conway’s memories inside of Flora’s memories.

MUSEUM STAFF: Was it a place where something sad happened?

FLORA: Yeah, I remember: he woke up there one morning and he didn’t know where he was. He was alone. He waited all day for someone to come and tell him why he was there but nobody did, so he left at sundown.

(“Museum of Dwellings”, Act I, *KRZ*)

After this, we are back to “the upper level” of narration—Flora’s recollection of Conway.

FLORA: He just stood still for a while. He said he likes kitchens. He feels safe in the kitchen.

Now the part that is weird.

He said he went into the basement.

MUSEUM STAFF: That cabin doesn’t have a basement.

[...]⁵

FLORA: He said he found a staircase in a closet.

Then he found a rope leading down a long pit, and climbed down.

The walls were covered in a glowing moss.

He used the light of the moss to find a lake at the bottom of the pit.

[...]

FLORA: The water swept around until he didn’t know where he was, and finally he fell asleep in the water. (Act I, “Museum of Dwellings”, *KRZ*)

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<sup>5</sup> The ellipses I use between paragraphs do not signal the omission of words. I use them to indicate the moment of interaction: at the end of each paragraph, the player should click the ellipses, after which a new paragraph appears. Said otherwise, this sign “[...]” indicates the episode transition in the game. This is important for analyzing the spatiotemporal arrangement of the text in the game.

Flora's story oscillates between four different text-worlds, four different levels: the one in which she narrates her story – first level; the one where she tells what happened to Conway while he was in the cabin – second level; the one where she retells Conway's memory of being in the unfamiliar house – third level; and the phenomenal world (the lake under the house) that interferes the narration on the second level. This oscillation coincides with Faris's understanding of "two-ways streets" common for magical realist poetics: "The 'verbal traffic' maneuver arranges events and objects in the text along on an imaginary spectrum running from the improbable to the impossible . . . from the uncanny to the marvelous" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 115). The aspect of improbability, which, according to Faris, constitutes the Todorov's uncanny, is the entire Conway's story of waking up in the unfamiliar house and spending there all day. The story about finding the basement (which, according to the museum staff, does not exist), climbing down to the underground lake and falling asleep in the water would constitute the aspect of the impossible – the marvelous. My assertion is that during this "verbal traffic maneuver", the ontological distance between the modal worlds, between represented spaces and temporalities, increases: the places and temporalities become indeterminate by moving further away from the uncanny, closer to the marvelous (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 90).

To sum up, I analyzed this episode from the two perspectives. I located how the game manages to clash two different temporalities. While visually, the game signals the presence of one temporality - Shannon, Conway and Blue's visit the museum, the text marks the presence of the different temporality – Shannon, Conway, and Blue's having left the museum; and their absence being emphasized. Additionally, I discussed how the domain of the text evokes the plethora of text-worlds, and how the ontological distance between them confuses the understanding of space-time relationships. Together, the collision of different temporalities and spaces, strive to undermine the player's feeling of progression.

#### 4.2.2 The Mineral Springs: “The Stars Are Drifting Along Indifferently”

Conway’s journey to the underground lake in the “Museum of Dwellings” is not a standalone episode in the game. It repeats itself later in a different, more pronounced form. Faris would denote this reappearance as the manifestation of mirroring – intratextual repetition which strives to subvert textual linearity (*Ordinary Enchantments* 127). I view it as the game’s utilization of prolepsis – foreshadowing – which functions as the way to literalize magical realist characteristic of indeterminate time and space, in other words, merging of the past and present. Strictly speaking, the future events of the game have already happened. Textual worlds and temporalities are constructed in mysterious ways that are beyond the player’s understanding.

When traveling down the Zero with Shannon (Act II), Conway can take stops. If these stops are part of the main storyline, the game will “transport” the player to the new place, such as “the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces” or “the Storage”. However, visiting any hidden locations of the Zero would not trigger the scene transition: the game would conceal the countering of the Zero, leaving just the white text on the black background. In general, these hidden locations of the Zero play a significant role in conveying the nostalgic atmosphere, eliciting the process of remembering in Conway.

One of the places Conway visits is the “Mineral Springs”. The description, provided by the game, reads as follows: “[T]hese mineral spring radiate with vigor and sweat youth from the pores of the cave walls, its sweet dampness evaporating and then recollecting on the ruddy faces or rejuvenated bathers” (“Pamphlet of Secret Tourism”, *KRZ*). The player can explore the place by controlling Conway through text: “Conway rests for a while. The water is warmer than it looks, and strangely soothing”. This is followed by the choice: “Think about the day’s work. // Think about the night starts. // Leave” (“Mineral Springs”, Act II, *KRZ*).

During my personal walkthrough, I decided to go with the second option, which resulted in the following passage:

Conway leans his head back, eyes close. It still feels like night, down in the cave. Not just the darkness, but the lateness of it. Somewhere on the other side of this rock, the stars are still drifting along indifferently.

[...]

He remembers some of Charlie's homework, from when he first went to college.

Charlie was home visiting Lysette and Ira for the weekend, and had some book *about* ... astronomy, or physics or something... Maybe math. Watching the relative speeds at which different stars pan across the sky, and using it to determine their distance.

[...]

Leaving the spring, Conway finds a few small aquatic insects nestled in his pant leg.

He leaves them behind. ("Mineral Springs", Act II, *KRZ*)

Earlier in the game, the player finds out that Lysette is an old woman Conway is working for. Her husband Ira died some time ago. At this point in the game, we do not know what happened to Charlie, and yet the undisguised melancholy of the passage hints at Charlie's tragic fate; the text encourages certain inferences. For Conway, these three appear to be important, since throughout the game, he keeps coming back to the memories they shared together.

Even though the lack of visuals in this scene could be justified by the budget limitations of game development, here the reliance on mere text and interaction with it serve an aesthetic and creative purpose, which becomes evident on the level of the sensorial modality of the game. Once the counter of the Zero disappears, the sound fades away as well. The transition to sudden darkness and silence does not only help to differentiate the Zero from the Mineral Springs, signifying the specificity of the place Conway visits (the underground tunnels). The transition helps to establish the oneiric tone of recollection, by, paradoxically, immersing the player in sensorial deprivation.

Of the material modality of the game, it could be said that the spatiotemporal arrangement of the text plays an important role in achieving this effect. In the text of literature, the pace of reading is not determined by the text itself (unless there are typographical experimentations) – all the passages are laid out on the page for the reader to look at. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, some parts of the text are always hidden, and the player can access them only reading one passage to completion and clicking on the ellipsis to uncover the subsequent passage. This kind of predeterminacy controls the pace of reading to strengthen the dream-like atmosphere of the scene by making the perception of the text more drawling.

On the level of the semiotic modality, the melding of worlds - the stylistic element of magical realism - could be traced. We know that Conway travels down the Zero, and that now he is in the cave: “Conway leans his head”, “it still feels like night”. Yet, he thinks about the indifferent stars “somewhere on the other side of this rock”, which signals the world shift. Then he recollects Charlie: “He remembers some of Charlie’s homework, from when he first went to college.” This recollection evokes two text-worlds: Charlie’s book about stars, which is thematically connected with Conway’s thoughts on them, and the very memory of Charlie, Lysette, and Ira that Conway cherishes. Then, we are back in the cave: “Leaving the spring, Conway finds a few small aquatic insects” (“Mineral Springs”, Act II, *KRZ*). In this short passage, there are three different textual worlds: the reality that Conway occupies, the reality Conway ponders upon, the fragment of Conway’s memory about his friends, and the book about stars.

While memories of Conway are ontologically further away from the act of narration, as suggested by Gibbons and Whiteley in their discussion of text-worlds (229-231), the “lateness” of the night and the motif astronomical figures together suggest spatialities and temporalities beyond human comprehension, accentuating the presence of even more distant

worlds (Act II, “The Zero: The Mineral Tunnels”, *KRZ*). This, in turn, coincides with the magical realist distinctive “slippage from the individual to the collective to the cosmic” discussed by Zamora (501); the slippage that aims to replace mimesis with poesis – to subvert linearity of time and predictability of space.<sup>6</sup>

That being said, the sudden lack of sounds and visuals, along with the predetermined arrangement of the text have an important bearing on the sensorial modality of the game. While the black background and the absence of sounds immerse the player in sensorial deprivation, textual arrangement attempts to slow down the pace of reading. Together, they aim at inducing the dream-like atmosphere to translate the process of nostalgic recollection. On the level of the semiotic modality, the game imitates the fractal transgression between different worlds, which constitutes the phenomenon of magical realism – multiple textual worlds. Worlds within worlds, stories within stories, memories within memories make up the *mise en abyme* structure of narration that prevents the sense of progression – of advancing further in the story – from occurring.

### 4.3 Media Representation as Textualization

Media representation, understood as a specific intermedial phenomenon, becomes a fundamental creative tool in *Kentucky Route Zero* to create multiplicity of textual-worlds and to enable textualization – magical realist phenomenon in which “a reader/author/nonreader will be literally, and therefore magically, transported into the world of the text” (Thiem 235). Furthermore, through media representation, the game attempts to convey not only personal nostalgic experience, but also conjure the form of collective nostalgia by filling its fictional world with “magic” outdated technologies and media. I call them magic to stress that within this media representation, the transmediation of magical realism aesthetics takes place. The

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<sup>6</sup> I will address this concept again in section 4.3.

interaction with older media becomes estranged and defamiliarized (the properties of literariness). Said otherwise, *Kentucky Route Zero* makes the interaction with older media poetical. While Elleström's model of modalities will not be addressed here, the concepts of media representation will be used extensively.

#### **4.3.1.1 “Look Closely at the Television”: The Wrong Signal and Grazing Horses**

In Act I, Joseph, the owner of the gas station and the first character Conway meets in the game, asks him to bring an old TV to Shannon Márquez who is fond of old electronics. Conway goes to the Márquez farm, which turns out to be an old house on a hill. There, he does not meet Shannon but instead talks with her cousin Weaver. At first, the conversation between the two seems ordinary. However, gradually, the magical protrudes through the real stronger and stronger. Conway asks Weaver about how to get to the Zero. She tells him to set up the TV. This is when the scene transition takes place. Before the TV has been installed, Conway and Weaver are inside of the house, with lights on (Fig. 4). After the TV has been installed, lights go off, colors change to dark shades, the camera zoom in on Conway and Weaver (Fig. 5). The only source of light left is the TV screen. The back wall of the house

disappears as well, uncovering the barn in the distance with grazing horses. The screen of the TV seems to transmit the image of a field at night.



Fig. 4: “The Márquez Farm”. Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. *Steam*, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

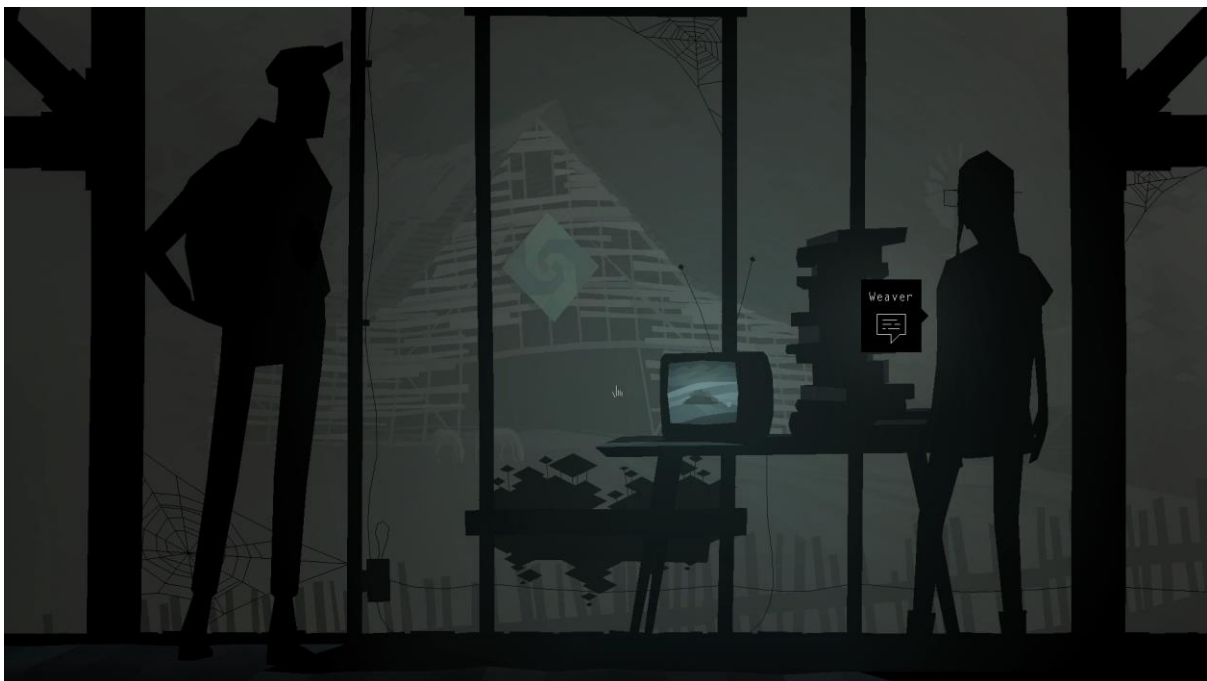


Fig. 5: “The Márquez Farm”. Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. *Steam*, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).



On the level of the sensorial modality, it is possible to locate a world switch – from mimesis to poesis, transforming reality to a dream-like space. Zooming in – moving closer to the characters – emphasizes the player’s deeper immersion into the scene. This is the invitation to enter “the latent” and hidden world – “the-ineffable-in-between” (Wilson 225, Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 45). The scene transition is accompanied with the intensifying and overlapping synth sounds which play an important role in setting up an oneiric tone.

Weaver tells Conway that he made a mistake when setting up the TV, so that it now catches the wrong signal. Yet, she continues: “It’s time to start paying attention, Conway. Look closely at the television” (“The Márquez Farm”, Act I, *KRZ*). This is when the second scene transition takes place. The camera zooms in further, first, on the TV screen, but then goes past it, leaving Weaver, Conway, and the TV out of the frame. The strength of the sounds intensifies even more. The static buzz emulates. What players see now is the horses grazing outside of the barn in the misty darkness.<sup>7</sup> Now, the magical does not just protrude through the real – it consumes it.

The second transition could be regarded as a transition from the simple to complex media representation – the frame between the TV and the surrounding world disappears. Furthermore, this transition from simple to complex media representation, is an instance of magical realist textualization, which takes place when the player, or “a reader/author/non-reader will be literally, and therefore magically, transported into the world of a text” (Thiem 235). When Conway and Weaver are in the frame, the player perceives them as characters of the game they can control. To a certain extent, they play the role of focalizers in the story.

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<sup>7</sup> One could suggest a connection between the analyzed scene and Yuri Norstein’s animated film *Hedgehog and the Fog* (1975), in which the hedgehog envisions a big white horse in thick mist and gets mesmerized by it.

When Conway and Weaver are out of the picture, the players become part of the represented world - they are being transported into it.



Fig. 4: “The Márquez Farm”. Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. *Kentucky Route Zero*. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. *Steam*, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/). These two scene transitions increase the ontological distance between the represented worlds.

The poetical scene of grazing horses seems to be far away from when Conway and Shannon are talking in the darkness, and even further away from the very beginning of the episode.<sup>8</sup>

This is an example of “two-way streets”: the movement from the improbable to the impossible (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 115). While Faris considers “two-way streets” a linguistic maneuver, *Kentucky Route Zero* illustrates how it can be achieved visually and auditorily. A more or less ordinary scene of two people talking inside the house gets destabilized by the sound and visual effects (no lights, zooming in) – the uncanny, and it gets

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchel in his paper “Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero” proposes the similar idea, although he does not analyze this episode. The game, according to him, often begins the scene with the familiar, and then it gradually destabilizes this familiarity.

even more destabilized when all the borders separating the world of the real and the world of the magical disappear, introducing the world of magical – the marvelous.

This movement informs other analogies as well. Zamora writes about the “slippage” of magical realist texts “from the individual to collective to the cosmic” (501). The grazing horses in the dark is an impenetrable, hermetic sign whose meaning is impossible to grasp and decode. In the game, they stand for something bigger than human existence, endowing the analyzed episode with the nostalgic feeling. They are the fragment of the dream that is beyond our understanding. Somewhat, Zamora’s discussion echoes Susan Stewart’s understanding of longing and nostalgia analyzed through the notions of “the miniature” and “the gigantic”. Susan writes: “The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated, and protected from contamination” (69), whereas the gigantic is understood as “our immediate and lived relation to nature as it ‘surrounds us’” (71). The gigantic “occurs in a transcendent space, a space above” (102). Although Stewart considers the gigantic as abstractions of different institutions, I believe it can be construed as Zamora’s cosmic – “a space above” (Stewart 102). So, the episode starts as a miniature. The house even visually resembles a doll house: without the front wall, we, players, have a chance to peek inside of the secure and familiar place. However, the episode ends with the foggy landscape with grazing horses – the transcendent incomprehensible gigantic of the phenomenal world.

Importantly, on the level of language (the semiotic modality), the presence of the phenomenal world is not so apparent. It transpires only once – in the text that represents dialogue between the characters. When Conway and Weaver resume their conversation after the second scene transition (both characters are still off screen), Weaver says that Shannon is her cousin, her “father’s brother’s daughter”. She adds: “We’re about the same age. Well, we used to be. She’s older now”. Her brief comment confirms the presence of the magical and

unveils the disruption of time, suggesting that Weaver might be a visitor from the otherworld – a ghost stuck in time, or who, probably, belongs to the place where the very concept of time does not exist.

#### 4.3.1.2 “Xanadu”: Getting Lost in the Hallway of Mirrors

In the third act of the game, the characters visit “The Hall of the Mountain King” – Donald’s underworld kingdom in the caves. Donald, an old developer, and his few assistants are sitting in front of “a pile of discarded electronics” that “burns steadily in the center of the chamber” (“The Hall of the Mountain King”, Act III, *KRZ*). Donald spent most of his life developing a perfect simulation of the caves of Kentucky – “Xanadu” that should be played on the old PDP-1 computer – one of the first digital computers invented (Whitson *GwG*). However, the mold of the caves has damaged the computers, which resulted in their severe malfunction. Donald offers the characters to try the system out anyway. On the first try, the computer does not work, and the characters have to find the temporary solution to fix it. After finding out that they need to clear “the crystal” of the computer from the mold, the characters witness the magic of “Xanadu”.

“Xanadu” is a text-based adventure game with basic vector graphic. The characters type in verbs commands, such as “go east” or “pick up lantern” to advance further in the story. At the beginning, the story follows Donald, Luna and Joseph (Donald’s friends of youth) going down the caves and setting up the equipment. After some time, “the strangers” appear, skeleton-like creatures, spooking Luna and Joseph away. Donald stays and he decides to continue work in the caves. After that, “Xanadu” imitates Donald’s work on the project “Xanadu” (Fig. 5). On the opening screen, there are charts and diagrams. It shows how many assistants Donald hired, as well as “Realism index”, “Romance index” and “Mold Coverage”. The players can perform several tasks – hire new assistants, assign assistance to tasks – research, debug, and description – and sleep, which reloads the system, bringing it back to the beginning.

After this point, “Xanadu” becomes cyclical – it entraps the player in the endless cycle of actions, creating an atmosphere of never-ending dream. Thus, the notion of progress is not valid in “Xanadu”. The repetition constitutes the estrangement because it strips the notion of control away from the player (Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children” 178). No matter what we as players do, everything repeats itself: “Rick fixed bugs. //Andrew fixed bugs. //Roberta muses about the love lives of fungal colonies. // Greg makes a convincing argument for the edibility of stone. // Greasy, black mold is collecting of the computer equipment... “Greg fixed bags.//...Rick had ideas. //Andrew had ideas. // Mary Ann transcribed experiences. Greg had ideas. Amy had ideas” (“Xanadu”, Act III, KRZ).

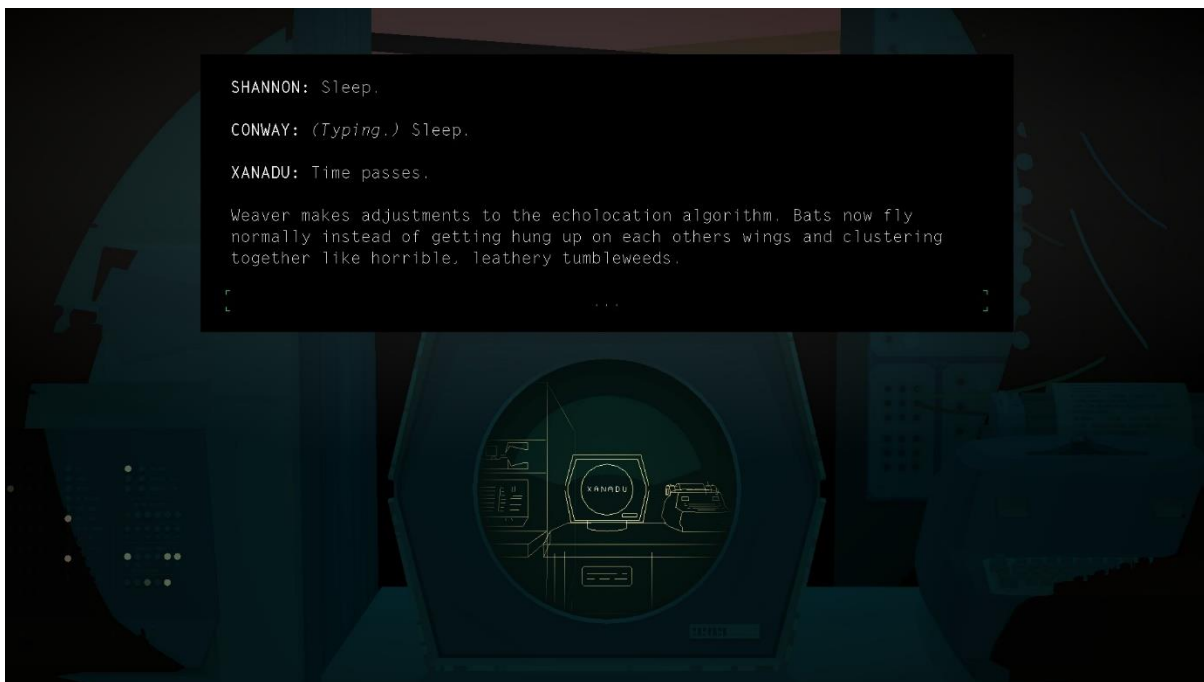


Fig.5: “Xanadu”. Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. Kentucky Route Zero. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. Steam, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

Furthermore, the sudden interruption of the repetition with poetical elements enhances the effect of estrangement. They indicate that with every next cycle the deterioration of the system becomes visible, the presence of the phenomenal world becomes more tangible. For example, Roberta, one of the assistants, sees love in fungal colonies. This is an example of the fantastic. We do not know if Roberta has lost her mind, even though such an inference is

possible. Rather, the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*, its oneiric optic of narration, its magical realist framing, suggest that the love might possibly live in the fungal colonies.

After several cycles, the characters start doubting whether the game even has an ending state:

SHANNON: Maybe we have to wait it out?

CONWAY: (*Typing.*) Wait indefinitely.

XANADU: Time passes.

Research assistants come and go. You don't encounter the strangers again, but sometimes you can hear the uncanny echoes of their voices, off in the tunnels.

Years pass. Mold accumulates. You and the remaining research assistants take to burning disused equipment in the center of the room. The black mold is intensely flammable and makes an excellent catalyst. It leaves behind a sweet, narcotic perfume.

One night, you have visitors. Outsiders. Different ones. Then, later that night, an old friend.

LULA: You really did go deeper into the caves ("Xanadu", Act III, *KRZ*).

This is where "Xanadu" brings the characters back to the cave, indicating that the time of the simulation aligned with the time in the cave, and we understand that Conway, Shannon and others are "visitors" and "outsiders" mentioned by "Xanadu", and that Lula did come to the cave after having not seen Donald for many years.

Under a closer look, it becomes clear that "The Hall of the Mountain King" prompts an intertextual and thus intermedial reading. "The Hall of the Mountain King" appears to be a representation of a variety of texts: Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Edvard Grieg's music score, Jorge Lois Borges's poem "Mirrors", and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kublah Khan*:

*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.* In my further analysis, I will focus on the latter two, whose intricate interwovenness with the game calls for closer investigation.

When the characters meet Donald for the first time, he hums a melody: “Where the old green river runs, through hills and caves not known to us, down to that sunless sea” (“The Hall of The Mountain King”, Act III, *KRZ*). Although he explains that these are the lyrics of the song about Kentucky, which he heard when he was younger, these words allude to Coleridge’s opening stanza: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan// A stately pleasure-dome decree:// Where Alph, the sacred river, ran // Through caverns measureless to man // Down to a sunless sea” (*Poetry Foundation*).<sup>9</sup> The melodic rhythm of both fragments, as well as their shared motifs point to their connection. “Xanadu” mentioned in the first line of the Coleridge’s poem is a magnificent palace of a Mongolian emperor “who dreams a palace and builds it according to his vision” (Borges, “Coleridge’s Dream” 371).

In *Kentucky Route Zero*, “Xanadu” is a duplication of reality – “an alternative world” to the alternative world (D’Haem 195). “Xanadu”’s world could be viewed as “the hybrid construction [that] emerges from a secret, always already contained within, forming an occulted and latent dimension of the surface of the world” (Wilson 225). In spite of the fact that D’Haem emphasizes that in magical realist texts in the process of duplication, the alternative attempts to heal the “real”, in “Xanadu”, fictional multitudes foreground the “wrong”. “Xanadu” in *Kentucky Route Zero* is Donald’s utopian dream. However, unlike Kubla Khan, he never manages to make his dream true. Donald’s creation thus constitutes itself, in the relation to the world of *Kentucky Route Zero*, as an element of virtual ruins, discussed by Schrey (34). The malfunction of “Xanadu” and its imperfection materialize

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<sup>9</sup> My discovery of this reference to Coleridge was accidental and happened during my personal walkthrough of the game. However, as time passed, the reference was later picked up by game critics, such as Roger Whitson (*GwG*), damaging the novelty of my discovery.

Donald's loss to time, strengthening the recurring motif of crashed utopias and unrealized dreams in the game.<sup>10</sup>



Fig.6: “The Hall of the Mountain King”. Elliott, Jake, Kemenczy Tamas, and Ben Babbitt. Kentucky Route Zero. Cardboard Computer. Published by Annapurna Interactive, 2019. Steam, [https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky\\_Route\\_Zero\\_PC\\_Edition/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/231200/Kentucky_Route_Zero_PC_Edition/).

Donald's “Xanadu” is also a representation of Borge's poem “Mirrors”.<sup>11</sup> The author mediates on the “horror of mirrors” which are referred to as “the impenetrable crystal // Where there ends and begins, uninhabitable, // An impossible space of reflections”. The persona of the poem sees “them as infinite, elemental executors of an ancient pact, // To multiply the world like the act // Of begetting” (60-61). The mirrors prolong this hollow, unstable world // In their dizzying spider's-web”. “The crystal spies on us”, writes Borges, evoking the uncanny feeling that you are “no longer alone. There is someone there”. In the

<sup>10</sup> “Xanadu” could be compared to the “Gallery of Mislaid Futures” I mentioned earlier in my analysis (section 4.1).

<sup>11</sup> In one of his interviews, Borges admits that mirrors have always been an important symbol for his works: “Because mirrors are very strange things... There is something strange in the fact that of the visual world being reproduced in every detail in a piece of glass, in a crystal. When I was a child, I was amazed at it. I find it very strange that there should be in the worlds such things as mirrors (Conversations, 197).



second part of the poem, “a dreaming king”, “king of an afternoon” is mentioned, who did not know he was in a dream (60-61).

The game references the poem in different ways. For example, the episode is called “The Hall of the Mountain King”. While one might think that it is a reference to Grieg’s famous piece, it has more similarities with the “dreaming king” of Borges (*Cabinet Magazine*). Donald is a king who is unable to wake up – he is consumed with “Xanadu”, the utopian unrealized idea, so that he decides to stay forever in the caves.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, to make “Xanadu” work, the characters had to clear the crystal of the computer, and the crystal, as was observed, is a recurring motif in “Mirrors”. Therefore, “The Hall of the Mountain King”, as well as “Xanadu” is an instance of what Wilson, referring to Barthes, describes as “stereographic space”: the space of an intertextual enchantment in which one text, or sliver of a text, associates itself with, pulls into its own textual space, some other text, or textual shard” (Wilson 226). Hence, *Kentucky Route Zero* pulls into its fictional world the text of Coleridge and the text of Borges, making different text-worlds overlap with each other.

Additionally, “Xanadu” is a mirror itself that embodies both simple and complex media representations. While the frame separating *Kentucky Route Zero* and “Xanadu” can be perceived – the players understand that they play a different game on the rusty computer – the borders between the two blur due to the immersive effects “Xanadu” produces and the very fact that it is not only a represented medium, it is a representing medium. In short, “Xanadu” imitates its own creation. These scaffolds of media representations are part of magical realist poetics. The relationship of text-worlds is highly tangled. For that reason, the concept of ontological distance between text-worlds, which I addressed in my previous sections, becomes inapplicable. In “Xanadu”, these text-worlds collapse on each other.

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<sup>12</sup> To think here about Platonian ideas and caves might not be misreading.

We, as players, occupy the first level of spatiality (Elleström, *Media Borders* 21), in which we interact with the interface of the medium – with *Kentucky Route Zero*. The game itself evokes the multiplication of virtual spaces and temporalities: the space and time in which Conway, a character we control, plays the game “Xanadu” (the second level), and the space and time of the game Conway plays, in which Conway also plays the same game – “Xanadu” within “Xanadu” (the third level). I consider this mirroring to be a radical case of textualization. Not only Conway enters the world of “Xanadu” – we as players align with the characters. The multiplication of fictional realities that superimpose upon each other, addressing Thiem’s words about textualization, “violates our usual sense of what is possible” (244). Media representation, in this sense, is a mirror that multiplies the fictional worlds of the game. Paradoxically, “Xanadu” is a maze in which it is impossible to get lost and yet you do get lost being immersed in “a hallway of mirrors”, in this incomprehensible multitudes of realities (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 127).

Media representations addressed in this section appear to challenge the player’s ability to follow transpositions between different textual worlds that the game imposes upon them. Whereas the first episode evokes the poetic destabilization of linear time by constructing worlds that are ontologically distant from each other, inducing the oneiric and nostalgic ambiance, the “Xanadu” episode seems to negate time by collapsing fictional worlds upon each other and overlapping their temporalities. While the old TV catches the wrong signal and transports the player into “the-ineffable-in-between” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 45), “Xanadu” itself stands for the unrealizability of human utopian projects.

## 5 Conclusion

*Kentucky Route Zero* proves once again that the boundaries between different types of media are not so clear. The game, as the analysis in this thesis showed, exhibits literariness by transmediating the poetics of magical realism. The taxonomies of intermedial studies allowed

me to locate the connection between *Kentucky Route Zero* and early text-based adventure games, which I studied as the complex media representation. The transmediation of magical realist poetics are arranged by the poetical defamiliarization of this genre. In particular, the magical realist fascination with destabilization of mimetic techniques was discovered within the game. My primary focus was to investigate the game's negation of progression and linearity – aspects that are important for standard examples of adventure games.

Through the application of multiplicity of worlds, textualization and mirroring, *Kentucky Route Zero* manages to convey a dream-like narrative where the player does not advance further but is immersed deeper into the worlds of the game. Through doing so, the game manages to realize the central topic of nostalgia, which itself is negation of time. As a medium, *Kentucky Route Zero* is nostalgic for its past through media representation; and magical realist elements implemented in the game facilitate nostalgic presence in its content.

As my final thoughts, I would like to point out that my analysis only scratches the surface of what *Kentucky Route Zero* has to offer. Cinematic techniques adopted by the game and the imitation of theater aesthetics would extend the topic of media representation. Furthermore, the political critique that the game carries out through the conventions of magical realism was only addressed in this thesis briefly, leaving a fissure for future investigation.

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