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Videogame Narrativity: Tense-Aspect-Mood,
Mechanical Drifting, and the Valences of Play in
Kentucky Route Zero's "The Death of the Hired Man"

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Abstract

This article observes how videogame narrative might retain certain aspects of narrative's linguistic genesis, actively remediating these grammatical elements into a pragmatic fusion of gameplay and narrative that I refer to as videogame narrativity. A prime example of narrative discourse being remediated in video games can be found in Cardboard Computers' *Kentucky Route Zero* (*KR0*) (2011-2020). *KR0* adapts narrative tense-aspect relationships to the videogame form through the conceptual intermingling of its four main narrative moods: debt, dwelling, death, and haunting. In the process of inhabiting the gameworld from outside through their gameplay, the player's dual-positioning is reinforced by these tense-aspect-mood relationships. As the game proceeds, this positioning becomes increasingly clarified by defamiliarizing the sense of 'dwelling' immersive gameplay effectuates; put simply, mechanical forms of control drift away from the player, who is then asked to learn new modalities of 'play' beyond the mechanical.

As control slowly wanes over its five Acts, players are pushed to adopt several interwoven valences of play which, at the same time, connote different forms of mediation in *KR0*: 1) playing the game; 2) playing in terms of dramatic acting; 3) the 'playing' of media by new media artifacts; and, 4) playing musical instruments. While there are many examples of these valences intersecting in the game's multifaceted narrative – including in the central plot's nostalgic longing for an American Rust Belt that can no longer exist – one of the clearest examples is in the optional side plot concerning James Carrington and his adaptation of Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" into an "experimental theater production." By observing how *KR0* adapts Frost's concept of

poetic, spiritual, and topical drifting into a kind of ‘mechanical drifting’ that slowly removes conventional forms of player control, I argue that Carrington’s ‘failed’ adaptation weaves together the valences of play into a dynamic fusion of narrative discourse and player interaction. Thus, Carrington’s plot duplicates the larger narrativity of *KR0* in miniature form, reflecting the ‘logic’ structuring the game back onto players in a way that clarifies it.

Keywords: tense, aspect, mood, narrativity, narrative, Kentucky Route Zero, video games, play

“Music does not narrate, since it lacks one of the minimal constituents of a narrating act: it does not produce perception of deictically shifted action . . . It can, however, . . . contribute strongly to the establishment of narrativity, that property of discourse by virtue of which it can be both story and presentation of story at the same time – ”

Nick Davis, “Inside/Outside the Klein Bottle,” 9.

Introduction

Any discussion of videogame *narrativity* – the “engendering logic” of a narrative that structures and communicates it (Sturges 763) – must begin by specifying how a game constructs, sends, and reconstructs its narrative ‘discourse.’¹ Given the linguistic roots of narrative as a concept, videogame narrativity necessarily consists of the tense relationship between how a game remediates² literary discourse and how it communicates narrative in ways that move beyond the literary. To that end, this article examines how three fundamental categories of literary narrative discourse – *tense*, *aspect*, and *mood* – are constructed, sent, and reconstructed in Cardboard Computers’ experimental video game *Kentucky Route Zero* (*KR0*) (2011-2020). *KR0* is a narrative-driven, point-and-click adventure game that follows Conway, an antiques delivery driver on his final job. Searching for 55 Dogwood Drive (the address for this delivery), Conway eventually traverses a mysterious highway called the Zero, hidden in the caves under Kentucky.

As their grammatical references suggest, narrative tense, aspect, and mood constantly intersect, generating the game's spatial-temporal dynamics. What distinguishes these narrative categories from their grammatical counterparts,³ however, is that narrative tense concerns the distortions between discourse time and story time; narrative aspect concerns the narrator's vantage relative to the storyworld; and mood mediates between these two poles, rendering tense-aspect relationships concrete. As these pragmatic adaptations of narrative discourse suggest, narrative is a *marked* linguistic category⁴ wherein the grammatical relationships indicated by tense, aspect, and mood are modified to perform the pragmatic needs of narrative.

In the case of *KRO*, traits from both the grammatical and narrative relationships of tense, aspect, and mood are carried forward and adapted to videogame form. The game's tense-aspect relationships predominantly⁵ reside in four overarching spatial-temporal constructs, which I refer to as the game's moods: these are the moods of 'debt,' 'dwelling,' 'death,' and 'haunting.' While undoubtedly part of the thematic content of the game, these concepts are also moods precisely because they concretize the game's tense and aspect relationships, rendering them 'quasi-inhabitable.' In this sense, moods create "the impression that a virtual world is *there* to be perceived, and that the receiving of a story might be an *entering* of it or a state of being *inside* it" (Davis 12). 'Debt,' for example, takes on a specific spatial-temporal coding representing past-present relationships, their persistence into the future, and the impossibility of reconciling or completing them (as seen throughout the game). 'Death' reflects the future tense that is not 'continuous,' as seen in the funeral sequence at the end of Act V and its connotations of burial and graves at the ending of the story both in Act V and the game's epilogue. Both 'haunting' and 'dwelling' occupy the present, though with distinct aspects: 'haunting' is generally retrospective and continuous, while 'dwelling' is generally prospective and continuous. 'Dwelling,' as compared to 'haunting,' also concerns the 'possible' future where one might 'dwell.'⁶

These tense-aspect relationships blend together to generate concrete relationships –what I refer to here as moods – between objects within the game's world: for example, the relationship between the ghosts

of miners killed in the Elkhorn Mine and the wandering bluegrass band The Bedquilt Ramblers. The miners were effectively killed by the neoliberal Consolidated Power Company which preys on the indebted population living near the Zero. These ghosts ‘haunt’ the Elkhorn Mine but also eternally ‘dwell’ in cassette recordings of their folksongs (Act I). Further, The Bedquilt Ramblers are a ‘quasi-Chorus’ who ‘dwell’ within or ‘haunt’ the gap between story and discourse throughout the game (Acts I-V; “Limits and Demonstrations”; “Un Pueblo de Nada”; “The Death of the Hired Man”). Consolidating the relationship between these different entities – the miners and the Ramblers – these moods unify disparate expressions of ‘debt,’ ‘dwelling,’ ‘haunting,’ and ‘death,’ resolving them in the final moments of the game when both groups (the miners and the Ramblers) appear at 55 Dogwood Drive and sing the funeral hymn “I’m Going That Way” with the game’s living cast (Act V). While nowhere near exhaustive, the pairing of these objects within the game’s moods reflects the general pattern: throughout the game, all narrative events, player actions, and diegetic objects intersect with these constructs, meaning they offer a useful shorthand for describing the narrativity of *KR0*.

Arguably, this ‘discursive’ approach to game narrative resembles arguments forwarded by game designers Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark, who have claimed that video games require “verbs and objects,” things for players to do and act upon to “create the experience, the dynamics, of the game for its player” (13). While Anthropy and Clark correctly point to the underlying discursivity of narrative dynamics between verbs and objects, what this approach potentially overlooks is how these dynamics are also subject to the complex processes of mediation inherent in all video games. In literature, story-discourse relationships are mediated by the narrator, whose discourse bridges the gap between where/when a story unfolds and where/when the narrator speaks to readers from. Conversely, the intermedial quality of video games makes locating this relationship a more complicated proposition.

While videogame narratives might be thought of as medium specific (i.e., they are video games), the medium they are specific to – video games – is itself medium non-specific. For instance, *KR0* articulates

itself as a game, a theatrical performance, a concert, an interactive-generative art installation, a film, a phone call, a museum, and a poem simultaneously. Since the game also features literary narration in certain moments (i.e., Will in the game's third interlude "Here and There Along the Echo" and throughout the Mucky Mammoth section of Act IV), one of the key dimensions of the game's narrativity concerns the game's emphasis on 'narrating' by fusing traditional forms of narration with decidedly 'non-narrative' forms. These forms, including games, theater, film, lyric poetry, and painting, have often been considered non-narrative precisely because they do not rely on the gap between story and discourse common to literary narration. Arguably, such a flattening is common to *all* forms of gameplay because gameplay renders story time and storytelling time simultaneous. As such, it is important to discern how *KR0*'s intermedial form reflects upon its narrativity.

Given the broader range of possible forms of mediation, the game proposes diverse conceptions of play to players, each suggesting variable degrees of player embeddedness and a range of potential interactions. It is through this interplay of various forms of mediation *and* the game's paradigm of interaction, then, that the game's moods are inhabited by players. Play thus occupies the gap between storytelling and story, reconstructing the game's narrativity. Because these different notions of play are frequently bonded to each other from within the game's tense-aspect-mood structure, I refer to them as *valences of play*. They are as follows: 1) *the player's playing of the game*; 2) *the enaction of a 'player's' dramatic performance*; 3) *the playing of new media objects*, which store and 'play' media on our behalf; and, 4) *the playing of musical instruments*, as diegetic/non-diegetic music repeatedly plays with the boundaries between the intra- and extra-diegetic levels of the game. Critically, each valence implies certain forms of 'non-narrative' mediation (games; theater; new media; and music respectively), meaning that it is through adopting these valences of play that the player inhabits and reconstructs the game's narrative discourse through play.

As this outline of the game's complex narrativity postulates, *KR0*'s ecosystemic approach to storytelling ultimately reflects the complex relationship between distinct, though equally fundamental

dimensions of its narrativity: 1) the *markedness* of narrative as a pragmatic linguistic category; 2) the aesthetic ‘particularities’ of video games, especially intermediality and interaction; and, 3) the ways in which a player’s actions re-enact a game’s narrativity as a kind of playing with/in its moods. To clarify this relationship, this essay unfolds in step-by-step fashion: first, I examine the shift from ‘classical’ to ‘postclassical’ notions of narrative, justifying the use of the concept of narrativity for *KRO*. I then outline tense-aspect-mood relationships in the game, observing how play links to these relationships in the game’s most significant sub-plot: the optional story of the drifting director James Carrington and his attempted adaptation of Robert Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Man” (1914) into an experimental theatrical production. This involves an examination of Frost’s poem and its influence on the game’s narrativity, especially through the generative concept of ‘drifting,’ which serves as a conceptual and mechanical foundation for Frost’s poem and *KRO* itself. Serving as a *mise-en-abyme* or inner duplication of the game’s narrativity – meaning that it is immanent to the narrative while also reflecting the game’s narrativity *before* players to better indicate how to properly inhabit the gameworld, – Carrington’s failed adaptation operates as story and discourse simultaneously, re-enacting the game’s overarching narrativity in miniature from within its story so that it can be inhabited and playfully reconstructed.

From Classical to Post-Classical Narratology: Justifying Videogame Narrativity

To justify the conceptual utility of narrativity, it is helpful to outline videogame scholarship’s continued relationship with classical and post-classical definitions of narrative. While the classical conception of narrative has influenced most discussions around the question of gameplay and how it actively resists the linearity and authoritativeness of narration (i.e., in the debate between ludology and narratology in game studies⁷), the works of narrative theorists like Marie-Laure Ryan (1991), Britta Neitzel (2014), Matthew Kapell (2015), and Daniel Punday (2019)

have increasingly broadened this classical, literature-dependent conception of narrative in ways that reflect on the particularities of videogame narratives as they actually exist. Arguably, this change reflects the broader shift in narratological theory from ‘classical’ to ‘post-classical’ schools of thought. In the context of videogame narratives, this shift aims to resolve two influential presuppositions taken from ‘classical’ theories of narrative: firstly, that narrative is exclusively a by-product of literary discourse, and, secondly, that the gap between discourse and story disappears in the dynamics of gameplay. These presuppositions are possibly the most substantial counterarguments to videogame narrative as a field.

Arguably, these presuppositions originate in the narratology of Tzvetan Todorov (1966/2014), where the three central elements of narrative discourse are *the time of the narrative* (“the relation between the time of the story and that of the discourse”), *aspect* (“the manner in which the story is perceived by the narrator”), and *mood* (“the type of discourse used by the narrator to make the story known”) (20). These categories are largely maintained in Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* (1979), though Genette views the time of the narrative as *tense*, while aspect is a sub-category of what he calls ‘narrative voice.’⁸ While here I retain Todorov’s notion of aspect to reflect both the grammatical and narratological senses of the term, it is for this same reason that I agree with Genette’s observation that Todorov’s ‘time of the narrative’ is, effectively, the category of narrative tense (Genette 29). Regardless of their differences, though, what is most important is that both of these influential models identify grammatical relationships as the foundation of any plausible analysis of narrative.

However, while the categories of literary narrative are naturally concerned with the relationship between storytelling and story because of the overdetermined role of the narrator in literature, this does not mean that the narrator’s discourse is the only plausible relationship between ‘discourse’ and ‘representation.’ For instance, because games do not require a narrator⁹ and do not feature a clear gap between story and storytelling, the gap the narrator mediates *disappears* in the context of gameplay. Encountering similar problems in other ‘non-narrative’

mediums like drama and cinema, though, has pushed narratologists to accept that the relationship between story and ‘discourse’ is persistent across *all* storytelling approaches. Such a shift is illustrated in David Herman’s “Toward a Transmedia Narratology” (2004), where he outlines a ‘quasi-dialectical’ model of narrative’s relationship to media: the ‘thesis’ of his dialectic postulates that “narrative is medium independent”; the ‘anti-thesis,’ that stories are “radically dependent on their media”; and the ‘synthesis,’ “that medium-specific differences between narratives are nontrivial but only more or less firmly anchored in their respective media” (“Transmedia Narratology” 49-50). Ultimately, Herman’s recognition that narrative is both medium-*independent* and radically media-*dependent* represents a ‘post-classical’ (i.e., *cognitive, embodied, and intermedial*) theory of narrative. This post-classical conception argues that a non-narrated narrative might remediate literary narrative discourse but is not exclusively consistent of it.

In terms of video games, the classical/post-classical conflict is clearest when observing this most fundamental element of literary narration – the relationship between discourse and representation – which is bridged by the narrator. Functionally, a narrator mediates the gap between discourse and representation by way of “deictically shifted action” (Davis 9). This deictic shifting has great ramifications for how a literary narrative is structured and communicated: by means of a narrator’s language, “[readers] and writers of narratives . . . imagine themselves to be in a world that is not literally present” (Segal 14). A narrator’s recounting of events is the *means* for “[prompting] their interlocutors to relocate from the HERE and NOW of the act of narration to other space-time coordinates” (Herman, *Story Logic* 271).¹⁰ This is what Herman means when he cites David A. Zubin and Lynne E. Hewitt’s theory of the “deictic center,” which argues that a literary narrative’s discourse opens a “conceptual window through which the storyworld can be glimpsed” (Zubin and Hewitt 131).

Arguably, the gap through which this *conceptual window* can be glimpsed disappears in games because “[while] in a narrative someone (a narrator) recounts actions, a game consists of actions carried out by the players” (Neitzel 609). Because a game’s world is represented *before*

players, who interact with it as though they inhabit it, games commonly rely upon “simultaneous narration, a form of narration seldom found in literature” (Neitzel 619). In video games, the ‘HERE’ and ‘NOW’ of gameplay is simultaneous with the storytelling, meaning that the storyworld is not only glimpsed, but ‘quasi-inhabited.’¹¹

Since the simultaneity of discourse and representation is a crucial structural feature of play in *all* games, this is by far the most substantial argument supporting the claim that games are not narratives.¹² However, because such a claim relies upon the classical conception of narrative, it is important to note that although “the story-discourse distinction is typically treated as if it explained something about the nature of story . . . [i]t still leaves us trying to explain what it is that makes certain kinds of discourse take on the profile of story – what it is that gives them as received the quality of narrativity” (Davis 10). In reconceiving of the relationship between ‘discourse’ and ‘representation’ as modal, narrativity corroborates that “the traditional distinction between story told and that story’s telling cannot be sustained in analysis” (Davis 9-12). However, this does not mean that story and discourse are not related elements of a narrative; rather, their potential intersection includes and exceeds the conventional literary relationship.

Much like the narrator-figure mediates between storytelling and story told, then, videogame narrativity proves simultaneously discursive and situational by arranging a conceptual framework – an ecosystem of rules, systems, objects, boundaries, and narrativized situations – around its objects and offering a range of plausible interactions for players. Players then ‘reconstruct’ this framework by means of navigating the game’s world, or, put simply, by playing the game. Thus, what gives the narrator-function its fundamental importance in literary narrative is remediated in the complex space-time relationships between tense, aspect, and mood in *KR0*. Narrative is not only what is rendered in the spatial-temporal gap between discourse and representation, but also in the structuring forces which govern all other intersections of a game’s communicated and represented elements. Because narrativity has a modal quality (i.e., degrees of narrativeness), it conceptualizes “*any* work’s . . . capacity for being a narrative” (Sturges 7; my emphasis). In this sense, narrativity

correctly pushes us to reconsider the “dual aspect of [narrative] composition – the aspect of . . . story, and that of its discursive representation” (Sturges 11) and how non-literary forms of ‘discursive representation’ might facilitate (or ‘send’) a range of plausible interactions in *KRO*.

Robert Frost’s “Death of the Hired Man”: Mechanical Drifting in *KRO*

While the conceptual window that opens onto the game’s ecosystem is omni-present, for the sake of space, this discussion will be limited to the story of James Carrington, a drifter, ‘mountain man,’ and theater director who players *might* meet in Act I. While optional and thus determined by how players ‘play the game,’ Carrington’s story concretizes the larger complex of tense-aspect-mood relationships by forcing players to navigate the game’s moods of ‘debt,’ ‘dwelling,’ ‘death,’ and ‘haunting.’ At the same time, because players can ignore or overlook it, Carrington’s story is one of the more consequential examples of the game forcing players to navigate the complex gap between the narrative and ludic dimensions of the game. While nowhere near exhaustive, the hope is that, by examining this smaller story within *KRO*’s larger narrative, the ‘logic’ of the argument is sufficiently illustrated.

Firstly, then, it is crucial to situate Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Man” within the broader narrative logic of *KRO*. Published in 1914, Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” reflects many of the thematic and structural tensions underlying *KRO*’s narrative. An especially striking feature of Frost’s poem is the use of vernacular forms of expression, which poeticizes the ‘drift’ or “unsystematic inquiry involved when people actually work out (or fail to work out) their problems in conversation with each other” (Jost 400). Further, Frost’s conception of the poet as a kind of “spiritual drifter” – a term derived from Frost’s own thinking but first applied critically by Yvor Winters in his rebuke of Frost’s “sentimental” approach to poetic form and topoi (565) – is deeply resonant with the game’s moods and the valences of play.

While Winters's rebuke of Frost was about the "intellectual, ethical and spiritual scandal of Frost's indulgence in gossip and conversation" (Jost 400), the term is salvageable conceptually because Frost's poem so clearly represents the power of 'gossip' and 'conversation' to mediate the drifting-together of once-divided worldviews. Situated around a man named Warren and his wife Mary, the poem traces the slowly drifting positions of these interlocutors in the midst of an unresolved, deliberative discussion about their former farmhand Silas. In disagreement about why Silas has returned to their farm "in winter" and whether he should be welcomed back after he abandoned his post "[in] haying time, when any help is scarce" (29-30), Mary rhetorically defends Silas's humanity, emphasizing that he has "changed" (38) and should be allowed the dignity to die where he feels most at home (33-39). Warren, conversely, positions himself as being "done" with Silas (30), who has failed to earn his right to call their home his own.

Over the course of the poem, Mary's defense of Silas succeeds as she slowly begins to articulate her definition of 'home' as "the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in" (122-123). This position is contrasted by Warren's counter-argument, that home is "Something you somehow haven't to deserve" (124-125). Interestingly, while early criticism of the poem championed Warren's position as one of abstract "justice" towards the moral failing of the "ne'er-do-well" Silas (Hopkins 176), it is actually Warren's position that 'drifts' closer to Mary's over the course of the poem. While Warren's criticisms of Silas "paint a picture of pathetic failure" (Hopkins 176), it is through Mary's constant emphasis on Silas's human dignity – and how they should *acknowledge* that dignity by giving him a home to die in – that the poem begins to situate the spiritual, poetical, topical, and physical drifting of gossip and conversation.

Silas, meanwhile, fulfills the structural "paradigm of gossip" as the "absent third person" Warren and Mary gossip about (Hopkins 176), remaining 'outside' of the immediate situation of the poem. Even as early as the poem's opening lines Mary has rhetorically encircled Silas, warning Warren of his return before he has even entered the house (1-10).

Rendering Silas “a function of talk and interpretation” by “keeping him ‘off-stage’” (Jost 414-415), “Mary’s talk drifts not only because she sympathetically echoes the drift of Silas’s delirium, but because she is fundamentally open to the wayward truth of the reality of which it would speak: namely, Silas’s life” (Jost 415). This ‘openness’ is reflected not only in Mary’s rhetoric, but also in how the drifting focalization of her perspective oscillates between descriptions of the moon’s wandering across the nighttime sky (1; 106-113; 169-171) and the wandering conversational mode she uses to persuade Warren. In this sense, while Winters argued that the formal drifting of Frost’s poetic approach fails to reconcile poetry and conversation as “two forms of expression” that are oppositional “extremes” (565-566), what is striking here is the obvious resonance of ‘drifting’ as a concept that reconciles this opposition alongside many of the poem’s central conflicts.

Ultimately, then, it is in this sense that Frost’s poem serves as a ‘generator’ for narrativity in *KR0*. Perhaps the most central feature of *KR0*’s narrativity is found in the game’s constant ‘drifting’ between forms of mechanical interaction (which drifts between different valences of play and different kinds of mediation) and the broader narrative discourse of the game (which itself drifts across the game’s different moods). Crucially, it is by means of the broader conceptual notion of poetic or spiritual drifting that Frost’s poem arrives at its central conflict, the disagreement regarding debts (i.e., who owes whom, what is owed, etc.). For example, Warren’s position throughout the poem relies upon “a moral rhetoric of rules, concepts, and fixed standards” which are “based on a kind of ‘social accounting’ wherein goods and utilities are balanced, traded, owed, and paid” (Jost 403). In this totalizing morality, the presumption is that Silas would have to pay to *earn his right to a home*. Mary, conversely, drifts towards a questioning of the debt they owe Silas *as a human being*.

Much like the conversation between Warren and Mary serves the poem’s larger focus on poetic drifting, *KR0*’s moods are ‘drifted through.’ This is because the first valence of play operates as a kind of ‘mechanical drifting.’ For instance, *KR0* is greatly indebted mechanically to ‘point and click adventure’ games, ‘choose your own adventure’ stories, and ‘parser’ games, all of which rely on language as a means of orienting players in

narrativized space. In *KRO*, this takes the shape of a ‘drifting’ conversation between narrative and mechanics, reflected in the game’s primary form of mechanical interaction *and* narration: conversations between characters. Thus, ‘mechanical drifting’ (i.e., literally pointing and clicking) functions by having players select different text-based options for characters to enact. For example, players are given the capacity to choose which lines of dialogue are performed, either from the focal point of a specific character or within a dramatic dialogue between multiple characters. All of this is managed by clicking on textual hyperlinks. Further, pointing and clicking is the same mechanism for players when they are interacting with objects in the gameworld, be it changing the channels on a television in the Lower Depths bar, switching stations on a radio while driving along the Zero, or redirecting the Elkhorn Mine’s electricity. In each example, then, the action of pointing and clicking literalizes the ‘drifting’ narrativity of the game for players to reconstruct.

What is most crucial is that these options are enacted by the characters and selected by players as they drift through the game. Unlike many games, which might aim to hide this gap on the representational level, in *KRO*, mechanical affordances are deliberately rendered at a distance from players, encouraging them to ‘drift’ through the game’s various spaces as though they were interfaces. Within each Scene of the game’s five Acts, players are offered a variety of forms of the same movement. Again, this takes the form of a mechanical drifting, especially because this is positioned at some distance from the player: when moving the game’s first protagonist Conway, for example, the player’s clicks will place a horseshoe stake and a horseshoe will drift away from Conway to that stake, which will be followed by Conway walking toward it. In another crucial moment in Act V, the player’s clicks render a butterfly, which is then chased by a cat. As all of these examples reveal, *KRO* utilizes movement in a counter-intuitive fashion to distance the player from the gameworld they think they are inhabiting.

Finally, this general approach to mechanical drifting is carried forward in between the individual scenes of each act, where the player interacts with different modes of transportation: at first with Conway’s truck – which simultaneously resembles a tire and game piece – along

highways and through the Zero (Act I, II, and III); secondly, with Julian the eagle's flight, which forces players to navigate by orienting his concentric flight path to find the correct destination (Act II); and, finally, the Mucky Mammoth ferryboat, which floats down the Echo River beyond the player's control, only making pre-arranged stops where players choose to explore or stay on the boat (Act IV). While players begin in a position of relative (though obviously limited) control – i.e., moving Conway's truck like a game piece – , even movement is slowly wrested away until all that is left is the choice of which conversations to listen to or not (as in the game's epilogue where players take on the role of a patron of the Lower Depths bar and merely overhear the epilogue's main conversation while watching TV). In this sense, all mechanical control slowly drifts away from the player, which further mirrors how Conway slowly drifts offstage throughout the game and finally disappears just before the end of Act IV.

As Alex Mitchell et al. have argued, such techniques of distancing are also forms of defamiliarization, particularly concerning “the structuring of the actions the player takes within a game, and the responses the game provides to those actions, in a way that draws attention to the form of the game” (2). As such, mechanical drifting (i.e., of control away from players, of players away from the immediate situation of conversations) is a critical element of *KRO*'s narrative discourse. In each of these examples, agency drifts further away from players by explicitly situating them both in and outside of the gameworld at the same time. The problem of where the player is actually situated is, thus, a problem of dwelling. By means of mechanical drifting, the lack of a clear ‘home’ for the player adapts a central argument posed by Frost's poem in terms of its own narrativity. Because players are never fully situated in the game's world, their sense of presence is mediated and rendered concrete through the relationship of narrative discourse and mechanical drifting. This relationship, therefore, is precisely where narrativity is situated in *KRO*.

Debt, Dwelling, Death, Haunting, and Play: Narrativity in
“The Death of the Hired Man”

As stated above, what makes Carrington’s narrative so exemplary of the game’s narrativity is that it is one of the only ‘truly influential’ decisions players can make in the game, once again mirroring the relatively greater degree of control players have at the start of Conway’s journey. Thus, it is one of the few examples that invokes the first valence of play, ‘playing the game.’ While it is not particularly notable that mechanical interaction is an expression of ‘play’ in a videogame, it is certainly notable that this valence is progressively defamiliarized throughout the game, pushing players to ‘drift’ into the other valences of play by increasingly removing their capacity to make impactful narrative decisions through mechanical interaction.

As previously stated, the nature of this choice concerns navigating interfaces as spaces, exploring places through pointing and clicking, and having conversations with ‘non-playable’ characters. For example, the game opens with Conway visiting a man named Joseph Wheattree at a gas station called Equus Oils. After drifting through a meandering conversation about debt and poetry, Joseph tells players that they can find more information about the path to the mysterious Highway Zero by searching his computer. Upon leaving Equus Oils, players are given license to drift around a large map of intersecting highways which will lead them both to scripted encounters along the highway and the game’s key narrative locations. If players ever return to Equus Oils in Act I, they will find Joseph talking to a mysterious “Stranger” named James Carrington. Carrington claims that he is attempting to stage an “experimental theatrical production” of Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” but has had the play’s original venue fall through at the last moment. He then asks Conway to hunt for potential venues as he searches for the Zero. From this point on, Carrington drifts in and out of the game’s narrative in Acts II, III, and IV, the second interlude titled “The Entertainment,” and the game’s unlockable epilogue “The Death of the Hired Man.”¹³

As players explore the game's world, they will progress through several prospective venues or potential 'dwellings' for Carrington's play. In Act II, the characters meet Carrington at the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, and players can choose between three specific locations: "at the surface" of the Elkhorn Mine "just before sunrise," at the "desperate" and "earnestly spiritual" Saint Thomas Church (located in the Random Access Self Storage facility somewhere along the Zero), or at the parking lot of Equus Oils "by the interstate."

This choice instantly aligns the first valence of play with the fourth, the playing of musical instruments, which, as stated earlier, helps to establish the boundaries between the inner and outer levels of the text. Upon selecting any of these options, Carrington mentions that "the psychoacoustics of the space are of prime concern," noting that

Psychoacoustics is a field of perceptual study: how do we 'perceive' sound? What does it do to our souls? How do sounds work through us? The play must 'resonate' through my actors in their performance. And then it must 'reverberate' out from them, and again 'resonate' through the audience. Theater is mostly acoustic, you see. (Act II)

Also, each venue intersects with the remaining valences of play aside from game play and the playing of instruments. For example, as Carrington makes clear, the 'playing of a theatrical role' is crucially intertwined with whichever venue the player selects, most notably because Carrington's play not only lacks a venue but also lacks actors and an audience. Further, each of these venues features a key example of the storing and interpassive replaying of human voices by new media; in the Elkhorn Mine, for example, Conway is told by Shannon about the miners who worked there before being flooded in a mining catastrophe. If the player fully explores the mine, they will find a tape recorder with recordings made by Shannon's aunt and uncle, "folk song archivists" "who spent time [in the mine] recording miners' songs" (Act I). At the same time, Shannon directly aligns the playing of new media with the playing of musical instruments, as her parents – who were miners at the time of the catastrophe – would "play music here, even when those archivists weren't around" (Act I). This pattern of different valences of play intersecting with these venues is broadly applicable.

Situated between Acts II and III, the game's second interlude "The Entertainment" is a particularly strong example of *KRO*'s drifting approach to mechanical interaction because it explicitly ties the game's spatial-temporal relationships with gameplay. A graduate student production directed by Carrington in the past, "The Entertainment" connects the game's moods directly to the valences of play by connecting the narratives of its four key contributors: the director, Carrington; the play's dramaturg, Joseph Wheattree; the set-designer, Lula Chamberlain; and the playwright, Lem Doolittle, whose work is adapted by Carrington, Joseph, and Lula. Each of these characters' stories unfold within the game's moods, further compounding Carrington's drifting relationship to the plot.

For instance, the arc of Joseph's plot is tied to the debts he owes to the Consolidated Power Company, which players learn by navigating his computer in Act I. Through similar accumulations of debt, Consolidated Power has liquidated most of the people in the game and, by proxy, has chased people away from their homes into the underground world of the Zero. Consolidated Power also directly ties Joseph to the mining accident which produced the ghosts who haunt the Elkhorn Mine, as shown by a memorial in the Echo River Central Exchange (which has also been liquidated by Consolidated and renamed the "Consolidated Auxiliary Switch Number 30") devoted to the workers who died there when "THAT POWER COMPANY . . . BOUGHT UP OUR MINE AND TRADED OUR BROTHERS' AND SISTERS' SAFETY FOR A LITTLE MORE YIELD BUT ONLY YIELDED TWENTY-EIGHT GOOD MEN AND WOMEN DEAD WHEN THE WALLS COLLAPSED AND THE TUNNELS FILLED WITH WATER" (Act IV).

While Joseph's story unfolds in the moods of debt, dwelling, death, and haunting, the dominant mood in Lula's is dwelling, as much of her plot concerns the future finding of a place for her artworks to dwell. As such, "Limits and Demonstrations" explicitly engages with the difficulties in situating and exhibiting her artworks. Great in scale and experimental in form, this retrospective gallery takes place in a gigantic warehouse, allowing her works to exceed the 'limits' of museum space and so finally be 'demonstrated.' Notably, Lula also appears at the

beginning of Act II as an employee of the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces and later talks to Carrington there. While I will conclude this section by discussing the Bureau and the question of art's capacity to 'find a home' in Carrington's plot, it is enough at this stage to suggest that these two points strongly corroborate my claim that Lula's plot operates predominantly within the moods of 'dwelling' and 'debt.'

Finally, Lem Doolittle is a local playwright who mysteriously disappears before the staging of "The Entertainment," although Conway and Shannon find him in Act III working off his debts to the Hard Times Distillery. A victim and later representative of the distillery's shady accrual of indebted souls, Doolittle's story clearly resonates with the moods of 'debt,' 'dwelling,' 'death,' and 'haunting.' No longer at home even in his own body (i.e., he is a skeletal figure, a symptom associated with overwhelming debt in the game), Doolittle's work to pay off his own accumulating debt has cost even his corporeality. It has also eliminated, in some sense, his ability to die (corroborating that debt progresses endlessly into the future), which prefigures Conway's eventual fate in the game. Thus, through Doolittle, Carrington's story points to Conway's later accrual of debt after he injures his leg in the mine, receives medical treatment, and then consigns his debts to the Hard Times Distillery after accepting a drink of the 'top-shelf' whisky Doolittle's ghostly, virtual skeleton offers him (Acts I-III). Much like Conway loses his corporeal form and slowly drifts 'offstage' in Act IV, it is also worth noting that Doolittle himself drifts in and out of the game.

Beyond the intersecting examples of its creators, "The Entertainment" is notable because it performs an explicit flattening of the relationship between narrative discourse and valences of play. Players are situated in the center of "The Entertainment," a play-within-a-play-within-a-play in three acts. An amalgam of two Doolittle plays – "The Bar-Fly" and "A Reckoning" – , "The Entertainment" appears to take place in an earlier era of the Lower Depths Bar. Players perform the role of the eponymous "Bar-Fly," and so, sit in the center of the scene. Situated immediately before them, "A Reckoning" is performed by the bartender Harry and several of his patrons. Behind the player sits the crowd. Players control their perspective by choosing text options and looking around the

dramaturgical space. By looking at the table they are seated at, they can perform a series of actions such as “[BAR-FLY:] (sits alone at a table with two glasses, one empty.)”; “[BAR-FLY:] (Looks at ashtray. Blows gently with pursed lips. Observes ash configuration.); and “[BAR-FLY:] (Sighs, shuffles, surrenders.).” If the player looks around the room, they can observe staging signs (“SCENE: Late night. The same tavern.”); a jukebox which reads out sound cues (Sound 15: Disconcerting hum.); reviews of the play (“‘ENTERTAINMENT’ BORES AT TIMES”); lighting cues (“Lights angled for general illumination.”); and, finally, production notes from Doolittle, Carrington, Joseph, and Lula.

In terms of the story, “The Entertainment” is about the accrual of financial debt by alienated patrons of the Lower Depths, particularly in “A Reckoning,” where Harry the bartender sells off the debts of his regular customers, who are then taken to work at the Hard Times Distillery. That Carrington’s adaptation of Doolittle’s theatrical ideas concerns debt – not merely in terms of the play’s content, but also in terms of Carrington as an adaptor – deeply resonates with the larger thrust of the game’s narrative. Further, the strange approach to mechanical interaction and the ‘dwelling in-between’ story and discourse described above are clear expressions not only of the game’s valences of play but also of their explicit relationship with the concepts of ‘dwelling’ and ‘haunting.’¹⁴

As was noted when discussing the valence of ‘playing the game,’ “The Entertainment” largely concerns the inner-outer drifting between discourse and story, which it deliberately flattens by situating players in the role of the bar-fly. As a result, players are pushed to perform the game’s narrativity from the dually-subjective position of a game player who is simultaneously outside the storyworld and yet performs from within it, meaning that playing with/in the game’s mood operates in both the ludic and the dramatic senses of play (i.e., the second valence) at once. This is most clearly reflected in Carrington’s production notes, which can be read if the player turns the camera backwards, showing Carrington standing in-behind the production near the audience. Firstly, Carrington observes that

. . . Lem Doolittle's original script for 'A Reckoning' has almost no explicit stage directions.

. . . From the author's essays and letters, we know Doolittle thought of the writer as an equal partner with the actors.

. . . The actors should have equal authority to write-by-acting into what Doolittle called the living script.

. . . Given the lack of stage directions, and our own interest as a company in foregrounding the physicality of theatre, we made the bold decision to borrow the stage directions from his rarely-performed pantomime 'A Bar-fly' and fold them into the action of 'A Reckoning.'

Given the aforementioned flattening, gameplay certainly resembles actorly performance on the level of mediation in "The Entertainment." Players drift between being a performer and a player, often embodying these two roles or 'consciousnesses' at the same time (Tu, Tunggal, and Brown 405). Crucially, players do not have the ability to 'choose' or otherwise mechanically interact with the performances beyond moving the camera around. They are stuck in the role of the pantomime Bar-Fly, "a character who perhaps could have done with a few lines after all" ("The Entertainment"), unable to clearly contribute to the 'living script' of the play. Thus, by blurring the gap between performance and gameplay, the gap between discourse and representation is likewise increasingly blurred in "The Entertainment."

While players do meet Carrington in Act III (at their venue of choice) and in Act IV (via a phone call where he exclaims that if his cast and crew do not appear on time for the performance he will "enlist the 'audience'"), it is more important to discuss how Carrington's story ends in the game's epilogue, "The Death of the Hired Man." Set within the Lower Depths, the epilogue has players controlling the channels on a television set that plays behind the bar. Off-screen, Carrington sits and discusses his failure to stage his experimental adaptation at whichever venue the player selected. For example, should players choose the Elkhorn Mine, Carrington narrates his efforts to Harry as follows:

Carrington: The acoustics, Harry!

Harry: Pretty nice, huh?

Carrington: Tremendous . . . lonely . . . melancholy.

Harry: Sounds like kind of a depressing place for a play.

Carrington: I spent hours tuning the Elkhorn Mine's old PA system to carry Frost's words with the perfect tonality.

Harry: The old mine?

Carrington: Yes. In a flash of inspiration, I decided to stage the production there.

Harry: They haven't used that mine in years – isn't it dangerous? Full of bats or something?

Carrington: A few bats. Mostly ghosts.

Harry: Weird choice. But what do I know . . .

Carrington: An uncommon venue. By design!

Harry: It's unique, I'll give you that.

Carrington: Even if an audience had materialized, there were other gaps in the production.

Harry: OK.

Carrington: The cast and crew . . . also absent.

Harry: Damn.

Carrington: So, I alone stood there at sunrise, with no play, and no audience to miss it. ("Death of the Hired Man")

Clearly, Carrington's efforts to stage the play in the mine resonate with each of the different valences of play: players have met and recommended a venue to Carrington by playing the game; players have performed the leading role in "The Bar-Fly" and are once again adopting the viewpoint of a cast member in "The Death of the Hired Man"; the TV set is the focal point of the scene, occupying most of the background while Carrington and Harry talk; and, finally, Carrington's constant emphasis on acoustics directly aligns with the playing of musical instruments.

Ironically, in the process of describing his failure to stage the play, Carrington unwittingly recreates Frost's poem. Himself situated in the 'defamiliarized' position that the player occupies in "The Entertainment," Carrington resides, simultaneously, within and outside of the game world and thus dwells in the 'drifting' gap between play and story. This drifting and dwelling explicitly fuses actorly performance with gameplay, arguing that both are a kind of 'dwelling-in' the windowed gap in-between story and discourse. Put simply, by 'playing with/in' the game's moods himself, Carrington unwittingly reenacts the conceptual and philosophical situation of Frost's poem from the vantage of a venue-less, cast-less, and crew-less theatrical adaptation.

For example, much of Frost's poem concerns Mary's rhetorical approach to Warren and his opinion of Silas, as I have previously stated.

While sitting in the Lower Depths, Mary and Warren's argument is duplicated in an off-screen conversation between Harry, Carrington, and Emily.¹⁵ Harry complains that his "erstwhile janitor" Brandon has arrived exhausted and unable to work because he had to travel overnight to work via the Zero. After a long discussion with Carrington, Harry goes to the back room of the bar to talk with Brandon, much like Warren does to Silas before finding him dead in his kitchen. At the same time, Emily consoles Carrington that his "play was a bust" before discussing Frost's poem:

Emily: I was just thinking about your poem.

Carrington: Oh?

Emily: Yeah, but I was thinking about it as a riddle.

Emily: Like, "What's the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in?"

Carrington: And the answer is "Home?"

Emily: No. It's "a grave."

[Harry returns]

Carrington: Our host returns! But so quickly . . . ("Death of the Hired Man").

Curiously, despite the correlation between 'debt,' 'dwelling,' 'death,' and 'haunting' that this duplication of Frost's poem prefigures, Harry's return does not end with Brandon's death; rather, Harry announces that he's sleeping in the back room, and the group agree to let him 'finally' rest.

As all of these examples show, the relationship between the valences of play and tense-aspect-mood is various and complex, particularly given how frequently these elements of narrative discourse intermingle. At the end of the game, each of these elements is further concretized in Carrington's relationship to the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, which is basically a collections agency for 'reclaimed' places which are reappropriated as a result of the owners' inability to settle their debts. As stated earlier, in Act III, players meet Carrington at the Bureau while he is requesting permission to stage his play at a venue under the jurisdiction of the Bureau. The contrast is clear: while the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces collects spaces and bureaucratically redistributes them (thus alienating places from their original inhabitants), Carrington's attempts at staging his play fail to revivify these reclaimed spaces through local artistic performance.

This relationship to the bureau again unites the modalities of ‘debt,’ ‘dwelling,’ ‘death,’ and ‘haunting’ in terms of Carrington. A prime example of this tension between Carrington’s efforts and the games’ conflation of ‘debt’ and ‘dwelling’ is shown on the Bureau’s third floor, which is simply labelled “Bears.” When players go to this floor, they see exactly that: an office full of bears. In this sense, the Bureau’s rampant repossession of once-inhabited spaces – including the dwellings of both humans *and* bears – , displaces humans to such a degree that Carrington’s play can find no home, no cast, and no audience because there is no one left dwelling – except for the ghosts – near the Elkhorn Mine in the first place. Unfortunately, then, Carrington’s play is inevitably staged in the Lower Depths Bar, fully drifting away from the spaces he attempts to recapture from the Bureau. Unlike Lula, whose works are carried forward into the future, Carrington’s play operates in the ‘possible’ mood (in the grammatical sense), precisely because it might not be staged, might not be performed, and so might never be seen.

Conclusion

Although Carrington’s story is ostensibly about the failure of his theatrical experiments to find a home beyond debt and the grave, in the end, he reconstructs many of the nuances of Frost’s poetics in the background of the game’s plot. In this sense, Carrington’s story serves as a *mise-en-abyme* or duplication of the narrativity *KR0*. Crucial for presenting a narrative without a narrator (Davis 12), *mise-en-abyme* reveals the proportions of a narrative by representing it, immanently to the narrative and thus recursively, in miniature. Given that story and representation are simultaneous in games, it might appear difficult for players to escape the ‘here-and-now’ situation of gameplay and story. By way of the *mise-en-abyme* that is Carrington’s story, however, the dimensions of the game’s underlying narrativity are duplicated, reflected, and clarified for players as they ‘quasi-inhabit’ the gameworld.

As I have argued, it is vital to critically re-examine more ‘classical’ understandings of narrative to better articulate the complex

narrativity of video games. To answer the question of how a narrative can unfold without the narrator to mediate between story and discourse, narrativity re-directs us to consider the “property of discourse” (Davis 9) which, through the discursive repertoire of a given work, allows us to apprehend ‘story’ time, ‘discourse’ time, and ‘reading/viewing/playing’ time as simultaneous. By considering literary narration to be merely one aspect of a work’s discursive repertoire, narrativity expands narration into a broad array of textual dimensions which allows one to reconceive of a text’s complex matrix of spatial, temporal, figural, and extratextual dimensions as expressions of a work’s narrativity.

In video games, this narrativity must account for the dimension of mechanical interaction, and how interaction relates to other dimensions of a game’s discursive repertoire. In *KRO*, players are given a fleeting sense of tension regarding the past-present-future relationships the game depicts, particularly by *limiting* and *demonstrating* the player’s growing distance from the game, its characters, and its narrative situations. This forces players to perform the game’s narrativity from the dually-subjective position of a ‘player,’ which implies both the ludic and the dramatic senses of play as mutually reinforcing forms of enaction or performance (Tu, Tunggal, and Brown 405). This positionality allows players to ‘quasi-inhabit’ the game’s moods, which are expansions of the concept of play beyond the mechanical interaction games are traditionally known for, and, equally tellingly, are reflections of different forms of mediation. In this sense, the game’s adaptation of narrative discourse into the video game form is mediated precisely by way of new media’s capacity for mechanical interaction, intermediality, and ‘play.’

Notes:

¹ This procedural conception of videogame narration is indebted to the concept of the cinematic narrator proposed by Seymour Chatman in *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Film and Fiction* (1990).

² See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999) for further discussion of remediation in the context of new media. In particular, their discussion of the relationship between older and newer forms of mediation is clearly relevant to this discussion.

³ Grammatical tense concerns ‘when’ actions occur; grammatical aspect concerns the ‘duration’ of actions, such as their continuation from past to future; and grammatical mood concerns the expressive inflection of the speaker regarding the referenced actions.

⁴ For further discussion, see Suzanne Fleischman’s *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction*.

⁵ Though there are certainly examples of grammatical tense-aspect relationships. For example, in the opening of Act III, which occurs in the past, or in the repeated sequence depicting when Conway and Shannon visit the Hard Times Distillery. In this second example, an event which occurs ‘offscreen’ earlier in Act III is depicted to players later in that same act. This is an example of tense (it occurred in the past and is ‘narrated’ from the future) and grammatical aspect (it was repeated within the narration). Also, Carrington’s story involves grammatical tense by way of its interweaving of the past (“The Entertainment”), the present (his story unfolds concurrently with the main game’s story), and the future (with the hypothetical performance of his play that never finds a home).

⁶ This can be seen in the first interlude “Limits and Demonstrations,” which describes how Lula Chamberlain’s artworks have finally found a home where they can be presented. This more hopeful thread concerning art’s future home is briefly discussed later in this essay.

⁷ See Kapell (2015) for a closer discussion of this debate.

⁸ In his work, Genette builds a structural model of narrative around the categories of tense, mood, narrating situation, and voice.

⁹ Obviously, there *are* games which have a narrator figure, including *Kentucky Route Zero*. This simply confirms that videogame narrativity frequently remediates the narrativity of other media.

¹⁰ This relocation is made “[by] means of linguistic devices” which express “information about the participant structure, object structure, spatial structure, and temporal structure of the narrated events” (Herman, *Story Logic* 271).

¹¹ Much like all computational texts, the ‘world’ of the game is generated by the underlying code of a computer program called Xanadu (Act III). Interestingly, Xanadu is a duplication of the progenitor of all adventure games, *Colossal Cave Adventure*. On the level of narrative, however, the transportation of players *into* that generated world is the main question.

¹² See Jesper Juul’s influential 2001 article “Games Telling Stories?”.

¹³ Carrington will always appear in “The Entertainment.”

¹⁴ By this I mean that players are, like the Bedquilt Ramblers, situated somewhere in-between the game’s discourse and its story.

¹⁵ Emily is a playable character in two of the games interludes, “Limits and Demonstrations” and “Un Pueblo de Nada,” while also appearing throughout the game’s five acts as part of the Bedquilt Ramblers.

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