

Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in *Kentucky Route Zero*

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of the relation between the player and the figure under her control have identified a duality between the figure as ‘avatar’ and ‘character’. This paper argues that two separate dualities are being conflated: an ontological duality in the figure, by which it is both *self* and *other* for the player, and a duality in the player’s relation to it, which can be both *subjective* and *objective*. This insight is used as the basis for developing a two-axis model that identifies four aspects to the player-figure relation. This model is then put to work on a close analysis of a scene in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013), which will serve to demonstrate the dimensions of the player-figure relation.

Keywords

Avatar, player-character, subjectivity, phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

What is the relation between the player and the figure under her control within the gameworld? This figure has been called by various names, most notably “avatar” or “player-character”. It is already telling that, as is evident through Rune Klevjer’s analysis (2006), both of these terms bear distinct implications that put them almost directly at odds with each other: “avatar,” tracing its etymological origins in Hindu mythology, defines the figure as a manifestation of the player (Mukherjee 2012), and “character,” conversely, grants the figure the status of an independent “possible non-actual individual” (Margolin 1986).

The aim of this paper is to sketch out a proposal for a new model of what we can term the player-figure relation. This shall be achieved through an extended close engagement with an individual scene from the point-and-click adventure game *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013, hereinafter *KRZ*), focusing in detail on how the moment-to-moment shifts in perspective, mediation and mechanics of engagement reveal multiple dimensions to the relation between the player and Conway, the figure under her control.

Before engaging in this detailed examination of the scene in question, however, I shall offer a brief overview of the discussion regarding this relation as it has been articulated to date. I shall make the argument that, in the various theorizations of this relation, two separate distinctions have been conflated into one: on the one hand, a distinction between a subjective and an objective mode of relation to the figure (that is, between the figure as the ground of the player’s subjective perception of the gameworld, and the figure as being

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related to from an external perspective, turned itself into an object of perception), and, on the other hand, a distinction between relating to the figure as *self* and as *other*.

Though there is a link between these two distinctions, I shall argue that they are essentially separate. Accordingly, I shall propose a model that plots these two distinctions against each other on two axes, revealing a tetrad of interrelated aspects to the player-figure relation. Once this has been done, I shall apply this model to the analysis of the scene in *KRZ*, demonstrating how it allows us to unpack the complexities of the player's relation to the figure of Conway. This analysis, in turn, should offer us general insights into the multiple dimensions of the player-figure relation.

THE PLAYER-FIGURE RELATION

When theorizing the figure under the player's control, game studies has tended to identify its nature as being determined by an essential duality. Peter Bayliss defines the entity as one that can be "considered to be co-temporously an independent entity embodied by its own constitution as well as a surrogate that embodies the intentions and actions of the player" (p.4). Klevjer operates on the same duality when he argues that "we must make a distinction between 'avatar' understood as a playable *character* (or persona), and 'avatar' understood as a vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld" (2012, p.17). The same duality can be seen emerging in practice in Kristine Jørgensen's empirical study of the relation players of the first-person shooter *Crysis* (Crytek, 2007) developed with the game's avatar. Initially, the impression is that "seeing the gameworld through the eyes of the avatar creates the feeling that the player *becomes* the avatar" (2009, p.2). However, when this avatar suddenly speaks in its own voice, it "gives the impression of suddenly turning from being completely controlled by the player into being an individual and autonomous being with a will of his own" (p.3).

This distinction describes an ontological duality in the playable figure. On the one hand, its status as 'avatar' results from its role as a manifestation of the player. The player, insofar as she perceives the figure, identifies it as 'herself'. On the other hand, the playable figure is also a distinct entity – a fact addressed by the notion of 'character', a term whose history in the narrative arts of drama, literature and film reveals its reference to a "possible non-actual individual" (Margolin 1986).

This distinction can be stated as: *the playable figure is granted the status both of 'self' and of 'other'*.

Though this is a duality within the playable figure itself, it is intrinsically related to the question of the relation between the figure and the player. As such, it is not surprising that it has tended to be conflated with a linked, but separate, duality: one that is located not within the ontology of the figure itself, but in the mode of relation between it and the player. This is the duality identified in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's discussion of the double-consciousness of avatar-play, according to which the player takes on the role of the figure in relation to the gameworld while remaining aware of her own existence as a player manipulating a game object (2004, p.453).

This double-consciousness allows us to map out a general distinction between the two modes of the player-figure relation. First, we have what we might term the *subjective* mode of relation. In this mode, the figure becomes what I would propose to call a *ludic subject*: a subject-position for the player to inhabit in the gameworld, determining the

perspective from which she grasps this world and the way in which she relates to it. In this sense, the ways in which the figure structures a subject-position for the player to inhabit in relation to the gameworld have been articulated through notions such as agency (Murray 1998; Morris 2003), instrumentality (Newman 2002), presence (McMahan 2003) or telepresence (Taylor 2003), embodiment (Klevjer 2006; Bayliss 2007) and incorporation (Calleja 2011).

The second mode of the player-figure relation, conversely, we can term the *objective* mode. Here, the player does not inhabit the perspective of the figure, but, rather, inhabits a perceptual position (not necessarily – and not exclusively – in the visual sense) outside of the figure, perceiving it objectively from a point-of-view distinct from it. As an example of an approach within game studies which has foregrounded the objective mode of the player-figure relation, we can suggest Emma Westecott's puppet theory of the avatar (2003).

The distinction is one of *playing* the figure versus *playing with* the figure. In the subjective mode, the player becomes the figure, seeing the world from its ludic subject-position – with the result that the figure itself disappears from the player's focus. This is revealed in Espen Aarseth's comment, regarding *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), that “when I play, I don't even see her [Lara Croft's] body, but see through and past it” (2004, p.48). In the objective mode, conversely, the figure becomes itself present to the player as an object of perception: the player is no longer only aware of the gameworld as perceived through the figure, but becomes aware of the figure itself.

This second distinction can be stated as: *the player can engage with the playable figure in both a subjective and an objective mode of relation.*

To summarize, the playable figure has a double nature – it is both a manifestation of the player and also, at the same time, a distinct individual, a character with its own attributes and characteristics that set it apart from the player. In addition to this, we can trace a double-sidedness to the player's subjective perspective while engaging in the act of playing. On the one hand, the player adopts the ludic subject-position represented by the figure as her own and looks out at the gameworld from this perspective, while at the same time retaining an awareness of herself as a player engaging with the figure as an object she perceives as being distinct from her. In short: the playable figure is granted the status of both *self* and *other*, and it is related to both *subjectively* and *objectively*.

The logical next step, it would seem, would be a linking of these two dualities – the one in the ontological nature of the playable figure, and the one in the player's subjective perspective on it – in a model that traces a direct correspondence between one and the other, thereby defining two divergent modes of experiential relation between the figure and the player. It is in this direction of a flattening-out of the two distinctions into one that game studies has moved to date. The unstated implication seems to be: if the figure is viewed by the player as the self, that must be because it is subjectively inhabited; if, on the other hand, it is viewed objectively, from an external perspective, then it can only be viewed as a distinct other.

Such a dual model of the player-figure relation, however, is built on an over-simplistic understanding of subjectivity. As the phenomenologist Dan Zahavi has noted, the question of subjectivity has traditionally been framed from two perspectives. On the one hand, we find the idea of “the self as an experiential dimension”, in which the subject is

equated with the first-person perspective that is the ground for phenomenological experience of the world, but that, by that token, cannot itself be experienced. Opposed to it, we find the idea of “the self as a narrative construction”, created after the fact in order to unite the disparate strands of moment-to-moment experience under a coherent identity (2008, p.8).

Zahavi argues that both understandings of subjectivity are necessary for a complete picture to be in place. In fact, these framings of subjectivity have often been presented as two sides of the same coin. Edmund Husserl wrote that “every act is consciousness of something, but there is also consciousness of every act” (1991, p.126). Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued for a similar insight within his development of an embodied phenomenology, arguing that, though the individual’s body itself is not an object of perception (insofar as it is that by means of which other objects are perceived), it can *become* an object of perception. Thus, for instance, when the left hand touches the right hand, the body is both (perceiving) subject and (perceived) object (2002, p.105). Paul Ricoeur, in the tellingly-titled study *Oneself as Another* (1990), makes perhaps the most cogent and tightly-argued case for the fact that the individual’s understanding of herself and her own subjectivity is constructed through an interaction between identity and difference. (Outlining these arguments in full is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper – but consider simply the case of someone who becomes uncomfortable about an action she has just performed, saying to herself, “This isn’t me.”)

The vital insight for our purposes is that reflective self-consciousness (our awareness of ourselves as individuals) is inherently based on a split between the self-as-subject and the self-as-object. This is also true of the player’s relation to the ludic subject, their ‘self’ within the gameworld, and, as such – in our understanding of the player-figure relation – an uncoupling of the self/other distinction from the subjective/objective position is required. Adopting such a multi-faceted understanding of the structure of the subject therefore leads us to move beyond the bi-polar model of the player-figure relation that has dominated game studies to date. Instead of an either/or option defining the player-figure relation as either a subjective relation of self or an objective relation of other, it seems we might instead suggest four possible modes of relation organised along two axes: determining not only whether the relation is subjective or objective, but also, at the same time, whether the relation is one of self or other. This would give us four aspects of the player-figure relation: subjective/self, subjective/other, objective/self, objective/other (see Figure 1).

In short:

- the *subjective relation of self* occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject-position established by the figure and perceives this subject as ‘herself’
- the *objective relation of self* occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, from an external perspective, but relates to it as ‘herself’
- the *objective relation of other* occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, from an external perspective, and relates to it as a distinct individual separate from herself
- the *subjective relation of other* occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject-position established by the figure, but perceives this subjectivity as belonging to a distinct individual separate from herself

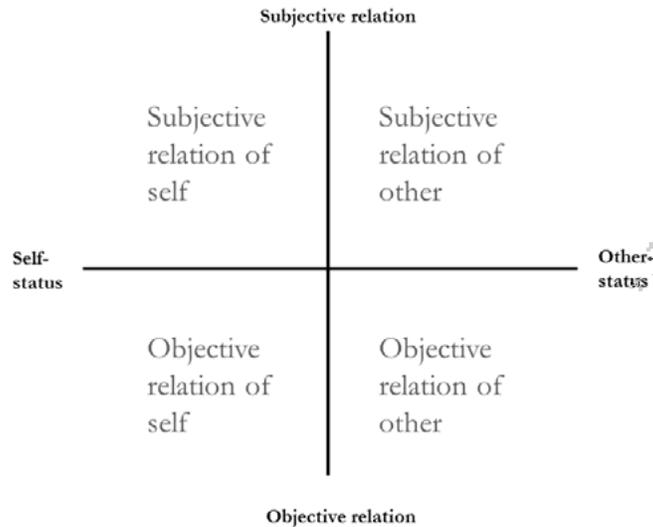


Figure 1: A model for the player-figure relation

I do not wish to make the argument that these are mutually exclusive alternatives: though different games might emphasize one pole of the scale over another, it is never a case of *either* an exclusively subjective *or* objective perspective, or of *either* a relation of identity *or* of difference. No matter which perspective or mode of relation comes to the fore at any given point, it remains shadowed by its inverse, and the distinctive nature of the player-figure relation lies precisely in the – frequently paradoxical – interrelation and interdependence of these opposing modes and perspectives, between which no definitive lines of demarcation can be drawn. As Annika Waern has noted, *bleed* between the perspectives of the player and the figure reveals the permeability of the separation between the two subject-positions (2010) – and this is not to be taken as an accidental or even an occasional occurrence, but as lying at the very heart of the aesthetic constitution of figure-based play.

THE PLAYER-FIGURE RELATION IN PRACTICE: *KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO*, ACT 1 SCENE 2

In order to gain a clearer picture of these interrelations, and of how the player-figure relation operates in the intersections between the four aspects identified by this model, it is time to turn to a careful consideration of an instance of the player-figure relation in action. *KRZ* is an episodic point-and-click adventure game whose first episode (or “Act”, in the game’s parlance) was released in January 2013. The playable figure is Conway, a delivery-person working for a small antiques business. The scene I shall take as the basis of my analysis – the second scene in Act 1 – plays out on the Marquez family farm. It follows an opening scene in which Conway pulls up to the Equus Oils gas station, looking for directions to an address to which he has to make a delivery, but which he can’t seem to find. Joseph, the aged gas station attendant, cryptically remarks that Conway needs to take “the Zero”, before suggesting he can get better directions at the Marquez household.

The opening

In extreme long shot, the player views Conway and his dog (Homer or Blue, depending on the player’s choice in the opening scene) on an empty path lit by the truck’s

headlights. The scene is framed by the wooden supports and roof of a porch overlooking the scene; at irregular intervals, a figure in silhouette walks past in the extreme foreground, momentarily obscuring the view.

This is an explicitly cinematic – or even theatrical – visual framing that immediately implies the player in a very specific position. We might say that the player is granted the perspective of one of the unnamed locals sitting on the porch, dispassionately observing the scene – and Conway – from their vantage point. More importantly, the visual echo of the proscenium arch imposes a self-reflexive formalism on the scene, explicitly foregrounding the player’s status as audience to the scene (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The opening scene.

It would appear we can already draw a neat conclusion here. Clearly, the relation that is emphasized in this instance is the objective relation of other. In this moment, the player’s perspective on the environment is in no way coterminous with Conway’s: she does not see the scene subjectively *through* Conway, instead, she sees Conway objectively, as a character *in* the scene.

Crucially, however, this is not an instance of what James Newman (2002) would term off-line engagement. The player is not watching Conway perform actions of his own volition in a cut-scene. While she is engaged in this objective relation to Conway, viewing him from afar as an object in a staged scene, the player also retains control of both Conway’s capabilities and perceptual apparatus. This is crucial: as Klevjer argues, it is through the capabilities that the figure grants the player in relation to the gameworld – which Klevjer, in a reference to Merleau-Ponty, terms the “I can” – that the playable figure can come to act as a subject-position that structures the player’s phenomenological grasp of the gameworld (2012, 27).

Conway’s capabilities, in the tradition of the point-and-click genre, are formulated around a context- and item-specific ‘use’ command; similarly, Conway’s perception is largely established by means of an equally context-specific ‘look at’ command. *KRZ*’s interface

communicates both of these in the form of visual icons contained in text-boxes hovering on-screen next to objects with which interaction is possible. In Klevjer's terms, this constitutes symbolic rather than tangible interaction, where "the player gives *instructions* to the avatar, via the controller interface" (ibid.) rather than being given direct control.

We might perhaps wish to qualify Klevjer's assertion on this point, and posit that the difference between the two categories he proposes is not one of kind but merely of degree. After all, *any* instance of figure-play is predicated upon some form of mechanism by which the figure responds to commands given by the player through the interface. As such, while conceding that some control configurations do more than others to close the phenomenological gap between the instruction and the performance of the action (as, for example, in the case of most action-adventure games), to say that this is, in any literal rather than metaphorical sense, 'tangible', is to distort the nature of the mechanism at work.

As such, even if the point-and-click interface remains, in comparative terms, a distancing mode of control, it still provides the basic structure to establish a phenomenological perspective upon the gameworld – a subjectivity for the player to inhabit that is distinct from her own. In this particular instance, while the player sees Conway from the perspective of the porch, three objects in the scene are presented with a text-box that highlights possible interactions – the truck, the dog, and a lone lamp-post illuminating the path ahead. Each of the three text-boxes has the eye icon that constitutes Conway's 'look at' command; moreover, the text-box attached to the dog includes a 'talk to' icon that starts a rather one-sided conversation between Conway and his dog, and the text-box attached to the truck also includes a 'use' icon that, if selected, causes Conway to get into the truck and drive away, effectively exiting the scene and returning to the world map.

'Looking at' the world

As an aside, it might be interesting, at this point, to briefly consider the phenomenological nature of the 'look at' command as a formal convention of the point-and-click genre. Considered as an action, it constitutes one of the primary verbs in the lexicon of actions granted to the player in relation to the gameworld (Crawford 2002). This is especially evident in earlier examples of the graphical point-and-click adventure game, such as the various games LucasArts produced using the SCUMM engine between *Maniac Mansion* in 1987 and *The Curse of Monkey Island* in 1997. Here, unlike in *KRZ*, "look at" was literally presented, thanks to the SCUMM interface, as one of a set of written verbs that the player can direct towards objects in the world. What is even more interesting, however, is how the 'look at' function shapes the player's perspective on, and experience of, the objects in the gameworld. After all, the player does not need to use the 'look at' function to see an object in the gameworld: all she needs to do is look at the object presented on screen.

What role does the 'look at' function perform, then? In simple terms, we can understand it as constituting a sustained gaze: the 'look at' command focuses subjective attention on a particular object, isolating it as a distinct figure against the background of the world. In phenomenological terms, we can call it an *intentional* function, meaning 'intention' in the sense of "intentionality," as defined by Husserl to refer to the manner in which an object in the world is intended (that is, grasped) in a subjective act of perception.

The question that needs to be asked, however, is – whose subjective perception does the 'look at' command enact? In most cases, what results from directing the 'look at'

command towards an object is a verbal description of that object. *KRZ* is no exception to this. If the player ‘looks at’ Blue/Homer, for instance, the following text description is offered: “An old dog in a straw hat. Both have seen better days.” Evidently, the ‘look at’ command reveals information about the object at hand that is not available to the player’s own perception: from the game’s minimalist, low-detail polygonal visual presentation, for instance, the player cannot possibly determine that the dog is old.

What this makes clear is that the ‘look at’ function enshrines a specific subjective point-of-view in relation to what it grasps. This leads us to the conclusion that the nature of the ‘look at’ function is the presentation of objects in the gameworld from a subjective perspective that is distinct from the player’s. Moreover, the information obtained from this perspective is conveyed through the introduction of a narrative voice, an introduction – to speak in Platonic terms – of an instance of *diegesis* in a form more commonly defined by *mimesis*, a representation in the mode of telling rather than that of showing. Which leads us to the question: this narrative voice, and the perspective on the gameworld from which it speaks, is not that of the player - so whose is it?

It is arguable that, in many cases, and certainly in the case of *KRZ*, this narrative voice, and, hence, the perspective behind it, is to be identified with that of the player-character. Petri Lankoski makes use of the notion of *alignment* (a term he borrows from the film theorist Murray Smith) to refer to the manner in which the player is given access to information in the game, a process which will either associate the player’s perspective to that of the figure (through a congruence in the range of information that is available to both) or position them as separate (if the player has access to more or less information than the character does) (2011, p.302).

The notion of alignment can perhaps be linked to a more widely-used, if somewhat controversial, narratological concept: Gérard Genette’s concept of “focalization”, which, likewise, is defined by “a restriction of ‘field’ [...] a selection of narrative information” (1988, 155). Genette provides us with a more rigorous terminology with which to analyze the restriction of information, and to answer the question, “Who sees?”. According to Genette’s taxonomy of degrees of focalization, we are dealing here with a case of *internal focalization*, where the perspective is linked to that of a character (1980, p.189). At the same time, the notion of alignment, Lankoski demonstrates, highlights not only *what* is known, but also *how* it is accessed. With respect to *KRZ*’s ‘look at’ function, this can be formulated as: The player instructs the figure to ‘look at’ an object by clicking on the object, the figure approaches the object, and only then, once the figure is located in the right position to examine the object, is its description shared with the player.

Since it is impossible, when analyzing an act of consciousness, to disassociate the intended object from the subjective consciousness for whom it is intended (Husserl 2012[1931], p.163), each instance of the ‘look at’ function reveals the subject that is doing the perceiving as much as it reveals the object being perceived. The player ‘looks at’ an object in an adventure game not only to learn something about the object, but also, just as importantly, to find out what the player-character thinks about that object.

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone has noted the extent to which, in the *Monkey Island* series, this serves to distance the player from the character by means of the foregrounding of Guybrush Threepwood’s “‘personal’ whim, preference or aversion” when examining objects – for instance, his disgust when looking at porcelain (2013, p.4). Conway’s subjective perspective is drawn in subtler strokes, but it is still the case that each stated

observation that addresses the instruction to ‘look at’ something constitutes what we can term a “predefined function” (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2009, 3) or a “character action” (Vella 2014) – an act (in this case, a verbal act) that can be attributed to the character as a distinct individual, not to the player. Even from the three observations in this one scene, the sensitive player can isolate some defined features of his unique perspective on the world: most notably, a capacity for laconic observation, and a distinct tinge of melancholy or wistfulness.

How does this force us to reconsider our understanding of the relation at work between the player and Conway in this scene? It seems we must complicate the conclusion we reached earlier. At the same time as the player is viewing Conway from her external audience-position on the porch, seeing him as an entity in the scene, she also shares Conway’s point-of-view (or, in narratological terms, his focalization) on the scene. In this moment where the objective relation of other is dominant, another aspect of the relation – the subjective relation of other – remains in play as another experiential layer.

Walking the path

The player’s relation to Conway’s subjective perspective becomes even closer when the player instructs Conway to start walking up the path. Of course, the player has good reason for doing so as opposed to, for instance, instructing Conway to go back to the truck and leave the scene. I have already mentioned that Conway has a reason to be here: he is seeking directions to complete his delivery, and has been led to believe he can find help at this farm. In ludic terms, then, this constitutes a quest – a series of actions, usually linked in a spatial traversal of the gameworld, that need to be performed in order to achieve a stated goal (Tosca 2003; Aarseth 2004b; 2005).

Lankoski (2011, p.296) has argued that what he terms “goal-related engagement” constitutes one of the primary methods by which a bond of identification is formed between the player and the figure. He defines this mode of engagement as “fundamentally an “I” experience: it is about the players acting to reach their goals” (p.306). However, if the player’s ludic goals in relation to the game can be made to relate to the goals the player-character possesses on a diegetic level, then “the emotions of the [player character] and the player will be correlated” (p.298).

Of course, as Lankoski is quick to point out, “this does not mean that the emotions or goals of the [player character] and player are always the same” (ibid.). The relation is not one of identity but of analogy: the player is eager to explore the scene further in order to complete the ludic quest she has undertaken, and Conway wants to get directions so he can complete his delivery and, presumably, go back home.

This might suggest that we run the risk of overstating this empathic link. Nonetheless, if cautiously framed as such – as an analogical similarity between the goal as seen from the player’s subject-position and as seen from the character’s, and not as a direct mirroring – then it certainly allows us to account for one mechanism by which the two perspectives are brought into closer alignment.

This alignment of perspectives is also represented visually. As Conway walks up the hill, the view zooms in closer to Conway’s position. The proscenium arch of the porch is left behind, and the way ahead comes into view: the player can see, along with Conway, that the path leads to a farmhouse on top of the hill, next to what appears to be a graveyard. It is not only this change in framing that works to link the player’s perspective on the scene

to Conway's, but also the game's impressionistic use of lighting, which highlights specific objects and parts of a scene as distinct figures as and when they become important, and allows them to retreat into a monochromatic ground as attention shifts away. In this case, just as the scene ahead of Conway comes into view, the scene he has left behind – the truck, the dog, the lamp – recedes into the background; it is no longer contained in his subjective perspective, and, hence, it is no longer part of the player's, either (see Figure 3).

As Conway walks up to the house, the viewpoint continues to zoom into the scene, with the framing becoming ever-more constricted: when Conway is at the door, the house fills the frame, just as it occupies the whole of Conway's field of vision and his attention. However, the house remains a dark, monochromatic silhouette: the player can perceive its shape, but cannot glimpse what is inside (see Figure 4). Once the player has instructed Conway to open the door, a text-box appears, granting the player the affordance of using an unseen light-switch. (We can assume, by drawing on our own experiences of walking into unlit rooms, that Conway has felt around for the light-switch in the dark, and that, as such, the availability of the light-switch to the player's perception constitutes another instance of the player's being made privy to Conway's subjective experiences – in this case, an experience of the light-switch intuited through the sense of touch – and, therefore, another instance of the subjective relation of other.)

It is only at this point, once the light bulb has flickered to life, that the shape of the house is filled in and the interior comes into view. The player can only see the interior of the house when Conway can see it, and she might share in his surprise when the light reveals a woman standing in the room (see Figure 5). Once again, the game's visual presentation links the two perspectives together and ensures that, though the player never stops being aware of Conway as a distinct individual she is objectively perceiving, she comes to relate to this other subjectively, adopting his perspective on the gameworld; even – as in the case of the perception of the woman in the room when the lights go on – herself experiencing the same sensation of surprise she might attribute to the character.



Figure 3: Walking up the path.



Figure 4: At the house.



Figure 5: Turning on the light.

Defining through choice

KRZ's use of dialogue mostly becomes relevant in the later parts of the scene, which constitute an extended conversation between Conway and Weaver Marquez, the woman he encounters in the house. However, there is one instance of dialogue earlier in the scene, which establishes the way in which dialogue is used in *KRZ* to determine both Conway as a subject, and the player's relation to this subjectivity. Standing next to Blue/Homer in the opening of the scene, the player has the option of instructing Conway to talk to the dog. If she takes this option, she is presented with a choice between two lines of dialogue: "Pretty dark out here, huh?" / "So I guess we just head up the path here; the farmhouse is up the hill a bit".

Choosing one dialogue option over the other makes no functional difference: either way, the dog will not respond. However, each option bears slightly different implications for the nature of Conway's subjective outlook on the world. The choice refers back to earlier dialogue choices in the first scene that followed a similar pattern, asking the player to choose between a comment that reveals a no-nonsense desire to get on with the task at hand, and an alternative choice that, instead, reveals an observational interest in the scene for its own sake. The first dialogue option in the game, in which Conway, having just pulled into the gas station, responds to old man Joseph's query, immediately sets the pattern down in explicit terms: "I've been driving all evening looking for '5 Dogwood Drive'." / "I've got a delivery to make on Dogwood, but I'd rather watch the sunset."

Each of the two dialogue choices frames Conway's perspective on the world differently: or, rather, each dialogue choice is the result of Conway describing the world through a different perspectival frame that reveals different personal traits. Since Conway cannot be both a disinterested, unhurried observer of the moment at hand *and* an efficient, goal-driven individual who sees only means and ends – since, in other words, he cannot both privilege the journey over the goal, and the goal over the journey – the two options are mutually exclusive.

If Conway's characterization as a possible individual in the gameworld – and the resulting make-up of his subjectivity in relation to that world – cannot contain both attributes while maintaining coherence, it must be the case that only one of the two attributes is to be taken as true: naturally enough, this is the one implied by the dialogue option the player actuates. What this makes clear is that Conway as a ludic subject is not a fixed, predetermined construct. While some things about him are predetermined and inflexible – his name is Conway, he works as a delivery-person for a small antiques store, he is possessed of a distinct weary melancholy, and so on – others depend, to a considerable extent, on the choices made by the player in the act of playing. Conway is only completed when the player actuates a specific performance of him within the (admittedly narrowly restricted) possibility space offered by the game's network of choices. As such, when we speak of Conway, we are speaking of Conway as actuated in one particular playthrough.

In this, Conway stands as a metonym for the way in which the ergodic nature of videogames necessitates actualization through the selection of a specific path of traversal through the permutations of possibility of the underlying textual engine (Aarseth 1997). To address the specific manner in which ergodicity relates to the formation of the playable figure as character, we can recall James Paul Gee's definition of the identity of the avatar as what he terms a "projective identity" emerging between the poles of the player's "real-world identity" and the avatar's "virtual identity", as vaguely defined as both of the latter terms remain in Gee's formulation (2004). *Projective* is meant in the sense of the resulting identity being an ongoing project worked out in the interaction between player and game for the duration of the player's engagement. The game, by this understanding, frames the boundaries of this possible range of characteristics that can be attributed to its figure, by rigidly limiting the choices and possibilities for action available to the player: this is the sense in which Janet Murray spoke of "dramatic agency" (2005) and Nick Montfort discussed the "fretting" of the player-character as "a constraint and possibility defined by the author" (2007, p.145).

To return to the specific dialogue option in question: all other things being equal (that is, if, as in this case, there is no functional difference to choosing one option rather than

another) on what basis does the player make the choice? In general (and assuming the player is not simply making choices randomly, or according to moment-by-moment whim) two options would appear to be before us. In the first case, the player might be choosing dialogue options in a conscious act of role-playing. Maintaining a relation to Conway-as-other, in both the subjective and objective modes of this relation, the player actively constructs him as a subject and a character without losing sight of his ‘otherness’ – that is, without ever identifying the resulting figure as ‘herself’. This is probably the case for large sections of the conversation that ensues in the Marquez house between Conway and Weaver, in which Weaver poses a string of questions relating to Conway’s background. When it appears that Conway might not be very familiar with how a TV set operates, for instance, Weaver asks why he did not watch TV as a child. The player is given three dialogue options to determine Conway’s response: “Mum heard ghosts in the static.” / “Dad was worried about radiation.” / “I watch TV.”

The response the player chooses is unlikely to have much to do with the player’s own childhood experience with TV, and is much more likely to be a result of the player’s attempting to actualize a particular vision of what Conway is like as a distinct person. Choosing either of the first two options, for example, would characterize Conway as having had a troubled family background and, potentially, an unhappy childhood; the last option, conversely, would imply either a “normal” childhood (whatever such a thing may be), or a reticence about painful memories. Whichever option the player chooses, then, the subjectivity that Conway represents will be shaped by the choice, and will, to some degree, determine the frame through which the player perceives subsequent events in the game – a case of what Waern termed *bleed-out*, “when the player shares the emotions of the character” (2010, 5).

The second option to consider is that the player might choose her answers to fit her own perspective on the gameworld. To illustrate this point, let us return to the initial dialogue choice at the start of the scene, with which we started this section. In deciding whether to express absorption in the moment at hand, or anticipation of the goals ahead, the player is certainly, as we have just argued, defining Conway as an independent individual. However, in the case of this particular choice – and in many other cases – she is also being given the opportunity to express her own subjective outlook on the gameworld by selecting the option which most closely adheres to it. A player who chooses the second option, for instance, might be one who has thoroughly internalized the quest structure that defines the adventure game genre, and who has, as a result, framed the gameworld in such a way as to push para-ludic distractions to the background. Conversely, a player who chooses the first dialogue option is more likely to be one who has taken to heart Joseph’s remark, in the opening scene, that, “You’ve just got to stop and take in that road.”

In both cases, the mental act that the speech act is read as being representative of – for the first option, perhaps an apprehension at the uneasy atmosphere of the scene, or, alternatively, an observation of the loneliness of the remote location; for the second option, an impatience at the long-winded process involved in finding a way to Dogwood Drive – belongs not to Conway, or, at least, not only to Conway. It is, primarily, a mental act resulting from the player’s own subjective experience of the gameworld, and it only *also* belongs to Conway insofar as, through the player’s dialogue choice, Conway is made to reflect the player’s pre-existing mental act – thereby constituting an instance of *bleed-in*, when the player’s own subjective perspective is projected onto the character (Waern 2010, 5).

What initially appeared to be, in the case of the player sharing Conway's perspective on the gameworld, simply an instance of the subjective relation of other – with the player taking on the foreign perspective of a character – is here revealed to be something more complicated. Conway's subjective position in relation to the gameworld has been shown to be partly configured by the player, with this configuration occurring in such a way as to reflect, at least at certain, vital points, the player's own subjective perspective on the gameworld. As a result of this, the subjective position attributed to Conway, which, so far, we have argued the player inhabits without suspending her awareness of its being an other's point-of-view, grows indistinguishable from the perspective that the player identifies as her own. Very closely – in fact, almost inseparably – tied to the subjective relation of other, then, we find yet another aspect of the relation: the subjective relation of self, by which the player comes to see the perspective embodied in the figure as her own.

It is not the case that the subjective relation of self supersedes or eclipses the subjective relation of other: instead, the two become closely interlinked, with the player identifying the subject-position and its associated figure as *both* Conway and as 'herself', with the balance between the two positions shifting from moment to moment. The player is more likely, for instance, to attribute the statement, "Pretty dark out here, huh?" to 'herself', while, on the other hand, attributing "Dad was worried about radiation" to Conway-as-character.

A record of the subject

We have established that Conway, as character and as ludic subject, is only completed once the player has actualized a particular path through the choices and possibilities for action afforded by the game. The next question we must consider, then, is: how does Conway, as produced through the player's engagement with the game, emerge as a coherent figure that the player can relate to?

KRZ is a game that foregrounds and thematizes its own mediation. Most prominently, it does so through a preoccupation with outmoded media technology. Not only do old televisions and radios feature prominently in both its plot and visual arrangements, but the game itself bears the audiovisual signs of dead medialities, referring back both to the history of the videogame medium and to earlier medialities, from the simulated cathode-ray flicker of its opening menu text onwards. Its angular, low-detail, solid-color polygonal visual style recalls the initial attempts at using 3D animation techniques in early 1990s adventure games, in particular *Another World* (Chahi 1991). Other stylistic techniques refer back even further: the map that Conway navigates when traveling between scenes is drawn in minimalist, white-on-black vector graphics *circa* 1981, with added textual descriptions that recall nothing so much as the scene descriptions in early text adventure games.

In deploying these stylistic borrowings from the medium's history, *KRZ* aligns itself within a postmodernist idiom, its stylistic *bricolage* of visual tropes and techniques borrowed betraying a self-reflexive concern with its own presentation and mediality (Hutcheon 1988). In the context of Westcott's remark that the screen-based mediality of videogames means that "the player is always audience to her own play act" (2009, p.2), where does such a self-reflexive approach to representation leave us? The foregrounded self-reflexivity of this presentation in *KRZ* directs attention to the game's status *as* game – and, hence, to the actions happening within it as game actions – as well as to this process of re-presentation itself. Moreover, this is an impression strengthened by *KRZ*'s generic properties. The nature of the point-and-click adventure genre means that, unlike

in, for instance, a first-person shooter or an action-adventure game, there is a more obvious temporal dissociation between player input and resulting visual presentation of the intended action, which, naturally, works to foreground this re-representative quality.

The most interesting aspect of *KRZ*'s mediation, however – and the most revealing in terms of the nature of the player-figure relation – lies in its treatment of dialogue. Whenever the player engages in a conversation with an NPC, the dialogue resulting from the player's recent choices is preserved on-screen in the form of a textual presentation. The interesting thing here, however, is the format this textual presentation takes: the lines of dialogue spoken by Conway and his interlocutors are presented in the format of a dramatic script or screenplay – an impression strengthened by the game's division into numbered acts and scenes, as well as by the use of a Courier-style font whose cultural association with the typewritten manuscript is unmistakable. This is particularly interesting when taken in the light of the designers' stated intention of placing players in the role of "the actor in a play", in that they "don't necessarily choose the dialogue or the plot, but they choose how to inflect it and how to think about, depending on their method of acting, the inner life of the character," thereby engaging in a form of "creative construction" (Elliott in Grayson 2013). It is tempting to link this back to Gee's notion of a "projective identity", and it is important to recall that, as we discussed earlier, the player's choices in shaping Conway-as-character are not purely disinterested choices about the nature of a distinct individual the player grasps objectively. Instead, these choices are manifested through the taking of actions from the subjective perspective that Conway constitutes – and, as we have already argued, the line between this perspective on the gameworld being identified as Conway's and as the player's own is blurred.

KRZ's re-representation of Conway's verbal acts – acts which, as we have argued, can be attributed both to Conway, insofar as the dominant relation is the relation of other, and to the player, insofar as the relation of self becomes primary – as a dramatic script therefore gives the impression of a dramatic presentation emerging as a unified text through the player's working-out of a path through the choices offered by the game (see Figure 6).

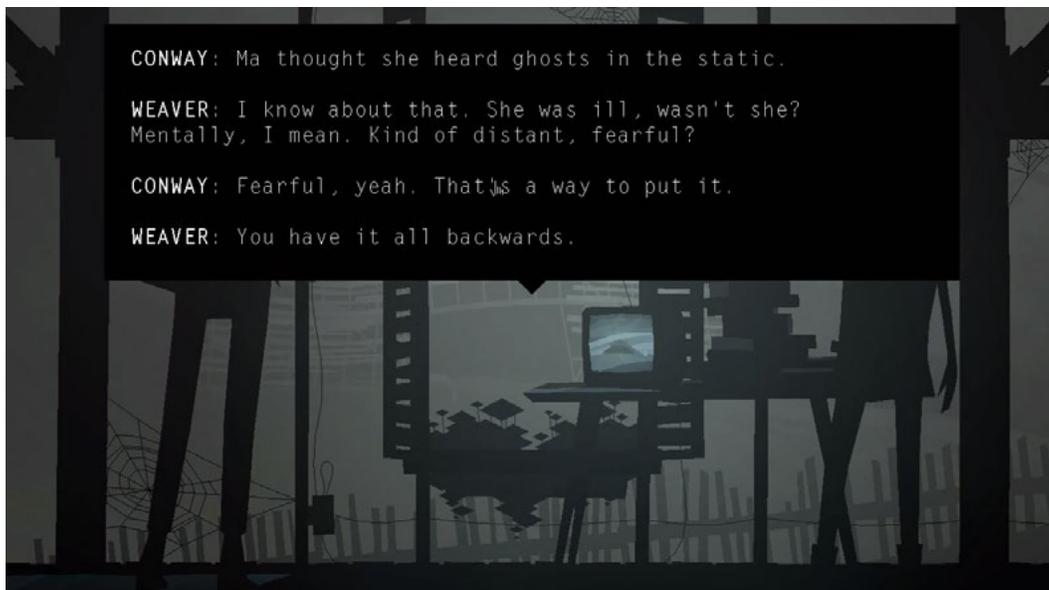


Figure 6: Producing a dramatic script.

This can be grasped as a very literal manifestation of Calleja's notion of *alterbiography*, "the ongoing narrative generated during interaction with a game environment" (2011, 124). Calleja suggests an alterbiography can take one of three forms. The first, the *alterbiography of miniatures*, does not concern us here, dealing as it does with games in which the player controls multiple entities, but the distinction between the remaining two is crucial. With the second, the *alterbiography of entity*, the character is the subject and protagonist of the narrative ("Lara Croft unlocked a hidden chamber in the ancient tomb"). In the third, the *alterbiography of self*, this role shifts to the player herself ("I unlocked a hidden chamber in the ancient tomb").

Given that Conway, as the protagonist of the dramatic presentation generated during the playing of *KRZ*, represents a subjective perspective that belongs to the player as much as to the character, the distinction between an alterbiography of entity and of self becomes, not effaced – for it remains a valid distinction for discussing the multiple layers of experience at work – but porous. Certainly, the protagonist of the dramatic script the player sees on-screen is Conway: but, since Conway is also inhabited by the player as a ludic subject, the conclusion we are to reach is that the player herself, as a ludic subject, becomes part of the game's dramatic presentation, and, hence, of its textuality. In perceiving herself in this way, then, the player adopts the objective relation of self, by which she becomes available to herself (insofar as she grasps the ludic subject as herself) as an object of her own perception. The ludic subject is therefore glimpsed from an external point-of-view. However, this happens while the player continues to relate to the figure as the self, thereby establishing an aesthetic mechanism of autoscopy: literally, a viewing of the self.

The player's ludic subjectivity – the self that she works out in relation to the gameworld, in the shape of the playable figure – is therefore re-presented to her as an object of perception. This allows the player to grasp 'herself' from an external perspective, objectively perceiving the shape, form and characteristics of this self. Here, the objective relation of self – the final aspect of the relation – comes forcefully into view.

Sharing the gaze

There is a final point of interest to consider in the scene in question. This relates to something which occurs late in the scene: drawing Conway's attention to patterns she perceives in the TV static, Weaver instructs him to "look closely". At this point, in the fashion the player is accustomed to, a text-box appears on-screen, displaying the option to 'look at' the TV (see Figure 7). We have already discussed the phenomenological implications of the 'look' command at some length, and, at this point, the player would presumably expect the command to work in the way in which it has been established: that is, providing her with a verbal description of the object in question (in this case, the TV) as it is experienced from Conway's subjective perspective.

Instead, however, what happens is that the visual perspective pulls in closer to frame the TV. For the first time in the scene, and in the game as a whole, Conway disappears from view: at this moment, the player's visual point-of-view becomes coterminous with Conway's. It is the player's literal, visual perspective, not just Conway's, that shifts in focus, zooming in on the TV, then past the TV to the view from the window behind it. Here, it is not Conway who 'looks': it is the player, along with Conway, who sees a barn, a windmill, two horses and a fence. The subjective perspective at work here is not *only* Conway's, but is primarily to be understood as the player's own perspective on the gameworld – in the sense that the player identifies the ludic subject to whom this

subjective perspective belongs as ‘herself’. Of course, it is in the light of Conway’s own goals – specifically, his need to locate 5 Dogwood Drive, and, hence, his need to find the entrance to “the Zero” – that the scene is viewed, and, in that sense, the subjective relation of other remains at play to a considerable degree. However, the shift in visual framing renders the subjective relation of self more prominent (see Figure 8).



Figure 7: “Look at” the TV.



Figure 8: The view past the TV.

As a hypnotic loop of ambient electronic music emerges to the fore on the soundtrack, the player, perhaps keeping in mind the admonition to “look closely”, inspects every detail of the seemingly mundane rural scene for anything of particular significance, taking the scene as a whole, and the individual objects within it, in her subjective intentional grasp.

Still, nothing happens: it is only when the player pulls back from her intense focus in perceiving the scene and clicks the mouse button that the next text box – containing Weaver’s next lines of dialogue – comes up. Weaver’s comment – “Hey. Hey, wake up. You spaced out for a minute there” – refers not only to Conway’s losing himself in contemplation of the mysterious scene, but also to the player’s doing the same. Again, the line between Conway-as-subject and the player’s own subjective perspective on the gameworld has been, momentarily, entirely effaced: it is not only that the player has taken on Conway’s perspective as her own while retaining a sense of his distinctive identity, but that Conway himself has vanished from view, both literally and figuratively, and the subject-position is grasped entirely as the player’s own.

After having been absorbed in this scene, Conway and the player grow aware of the bigger scene again - the view zooms out to show the interior of the house, but Weaver is not there any more. The sense of the uncanny that this sudden disappearance presents is predicated not only on a limitation of Conway’s perspective, but also of the player’s. It works precisely because, in the instance of Weaver’s disappearance, the player has fully adopted Conway’s subject-position, and shares the limitations of his viewpoint, attention and focus – or, in Lankoski’s terms, his alignment. The player does not see what happens to Weaver because Conway doesn’t see, and her perspective on the gameworld is, in this moment, his: a perfect example of the subjective relation of other in action.

CONCLUSIONS

The scene ends in a rapid inversion of the sequence of perspectival shifts through which it unfolds. As Conway leaves the now-empty house and follows the path down the hill and back to Blue/Homer and the truck, the visual perspective zooms back outwards until, finally, Conway returns to being a small figure in a bigger scene, framed by the porch in the foreground. The silhouetted figures on the porch have now gathered themselves into a bluegrass band, and, as the scene draws to a close, they strike up a performance of a song whose lyrics offer a commentary on Conway’s plight (see Figure 9).

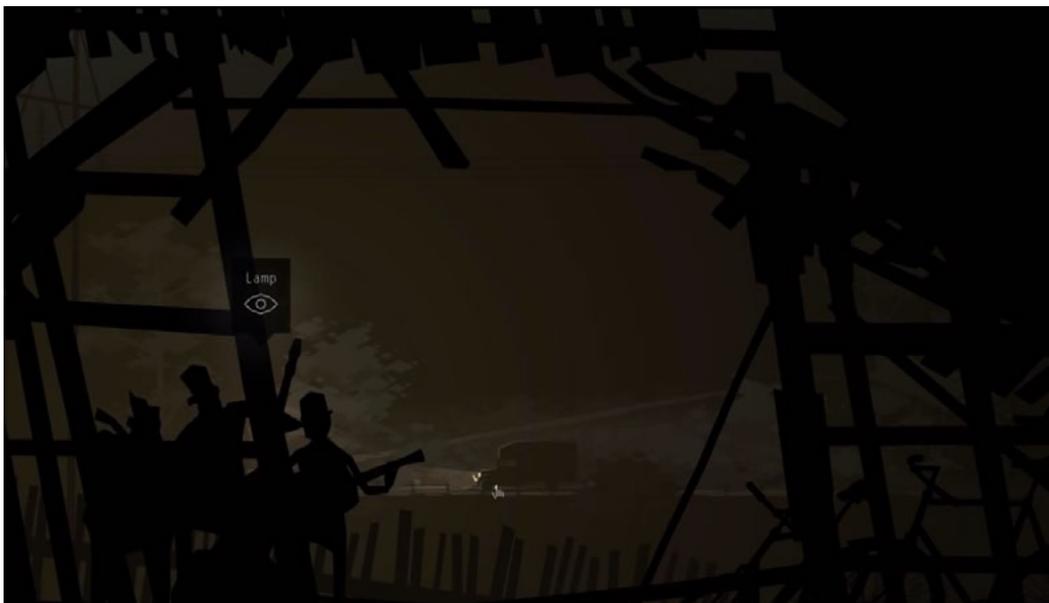


Figure 9: The bluegrass band.

These final moments therefore enact a return to Conway being framed as an other through an external perspective, with the player in the position of the audience viewing the scene, and Conway as a character within it, from the outside. However, if it was possible to take this perspective at face value at the start of the scene, it is certainly impossible to do so at the end, once the player has related to Conway in all four aspects we have identified in the player-figure relation. What I hope my analysis of this scene has demonstrated is how these aspects interrelate in a complex relationship, interweaving the player and Conway in relations of identity and alterity, objective distance and subjective merging. When playing/with the figure of Conway, the player *is* Conway, but also plays him as a distinct figure. She sees the gameworld from the subject-position he represents, inhabiting him as a ludic subject, but she also perceives him – and hence, insofar as she identifies with his subjective position, herself – from an external position, as object. It is in the interrelations of these seemingly paradoxical dimensions that the aesthetic and formal nature of the player-figure relation comes fully to the fore.

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