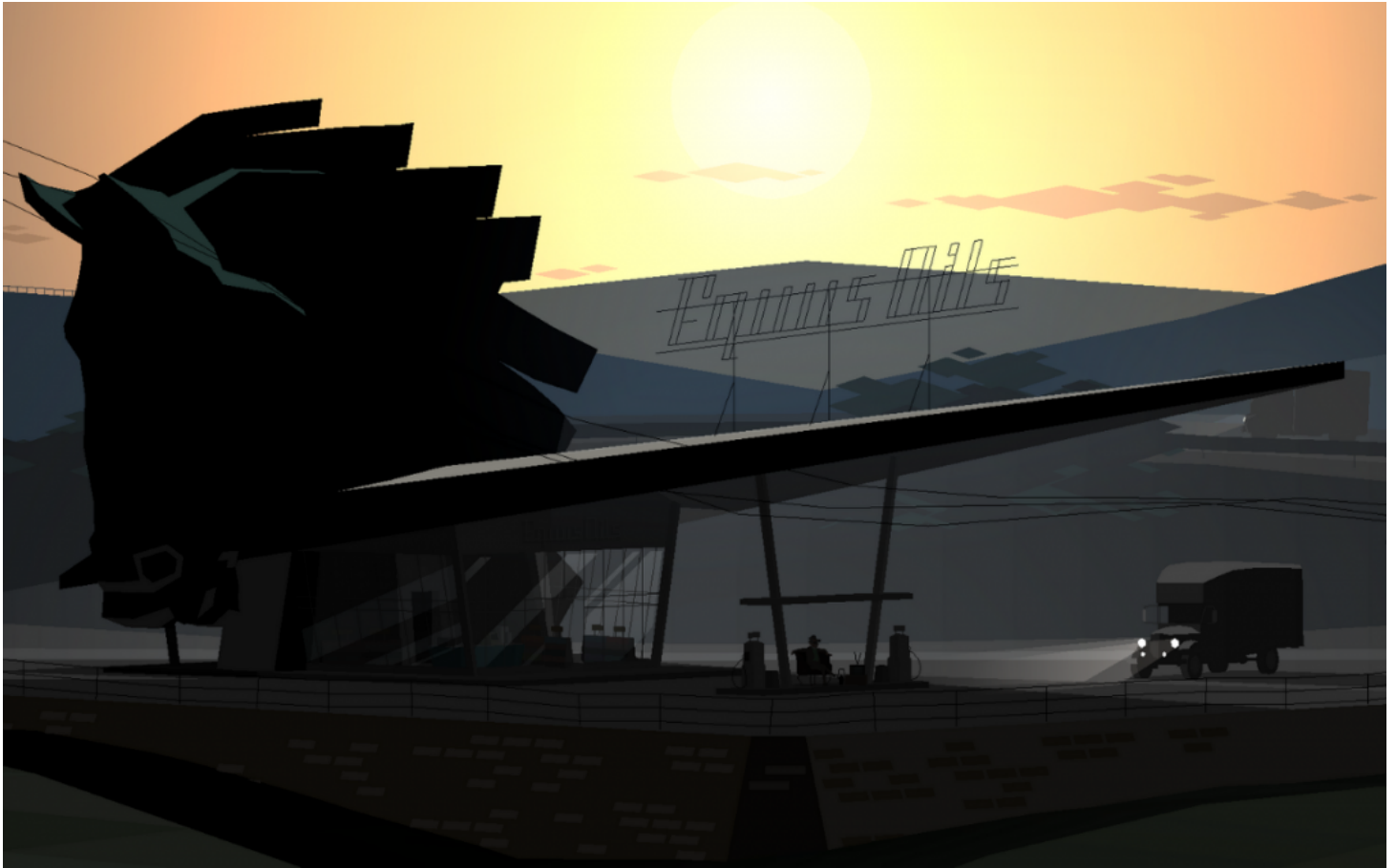


# Busy and Poor: The Gentle Violence of Kentucky Route Zero

by Madison Butler | Jan 28, 2020 | Essays, Video Games | 0 comments



*Kentucky Route Zero* is not a violent game: it has no swords, no guns, no combat. It's not a traditional horror game, either, with no jump scares or gore or monsters. And yet... it is a game *about* violence, and a game that uses horror elements to drive its themes home.

*This article contains spoilers for Kentucky Route Zero, Acts I through IV.*

At time of writing, *Kentucky Route Zero* consisted of four acts released episodically between 2013 and 2016, with a fifth act planned but not announced until early 2020. Initially, the game tells the story of a truck driver named Conway and his dog, who the player can name either Homer or Blue. (I chose Blue, which is how I'm going to refer to the dog for simplicity's sake.) Conway and Blue are making one final delivery for an antique shop to an address that doesn't seem to exist, and go on a twisting journey along a subterranean highway: the titular Zero.

Along the way, Conway collects a group of not-quite-friends, first meeting Shannon Márquez, who repairs televisions out of the back of a bait and tackle shop, and then Ezra, a precocious child who is searching for his missing parents. Later they meet Johnny and Junebug, two musical androids who lend a hand when Conway's truck breaks down, and Will and Cate, who run the tugboat that traverses the subterranean Echo River.

*Kentucky Route Zero's* developer, Cardboard Computer, describes it as a magical realist adventure. Though artists have ascribed their own meaning to magical realism since it was first used in the 1920s, the core concept hasn't strayed too far from Franz Roh's initial definition: "a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane," and which "offers a calm admiration of the magic of being." At its simplest, magical realist stories involve unexplained magical elements being inserted into an otherwise realistic story. The audience never fully understands how the magic works, but they don't need to.

One of the other important things to know about magical realist stories is that they are often used to critique real-world systems and politics. This is an area in which *Kentucky Route Zero* excels: all of its characters are scarred, all of them are victims of the same monopolistic business. It is not a violent game, but it is still a game with a villain, and Consolidated Power Co. is most certainly that villain. It's the company that owned the mine Shannon's parents died in, the company to which Conway owes his medical bills after losing his leg in an accident, the company that Johnny and Junebug were developed to service.

On paper, it sounds almost cartoonishly villainous, but the ubiquitousness of the Consolidated Power Co. is comparable to any number of real-life tech companies. Consolidated Power can brand itself by a different name or buy out businesses, but at the end of the day, the company profits from the broken backs of its workers and by leveraging predatory practices against them. *Kentucky Route Zero* doesn't make Consolidated Power's ubiquity so obvious at first. The player first hears a gas station attendant mention it when Conway stops for directions at in the beginning of the game. And then it's the company that repossessed Shannon's cousin Weaver's home, and the company responsible for flattening a neighborhood to build a Museum of Dwellings.

Consolidated Power is a company that owns everything and everyone, and as you play the game you watch the company take ownership of what few assets Conway has—including his future—in real time. Stopping at the gas station is the first errand of many he undertakes to find 5 Dogwood Drive, and Act I culminates in Conway finding Shannon at the abandoned Elkhorn Mine Shaft and subsequently getting trapped in a mine collapse. His leg, injured in the collapse, gets progressively worse until the group finds a doctor to treat it. Act III begins with Conway waking from the anesthetic to find a fluorescent, skeletal limb where his leg was, and Dr. Truman explaining how Conway can make payments to his new employer—Consolidated Power Co.

This is what I mean when I say *Kentucky Route Zero* is a game about violence. Specifically, it is a game about the violence an uncaring system enacts on the impoverished people who live in it. It asks what Conway will give up to survive; as a result we watch it take and take until, at the end of Act IV, Shannon turns around, and Conway is simply gone, and three indistinct skeletons are disappearing from the screen without a word.

Sometime early in Act IV, which takes you on a winding journey down the Echo River, I realized I had forgotten the game's goal entirely for a moment. It was pleasant to travel the Echo with so many acquaintances, but disorienting to realize it had taken so long to approach the destination. *Kentucky Route Zero* warps your perception of time, as though it exists in a time apart from the rest of the world.

This liminality is part of what makes the story work, though, part of its unexplained magic. The liminal state is the in-between, the moment of crossing the threshold, when your foot hovers for that split second as you pass through the door and you are neither inside nor outside. The liminal state is the flash of time a person spends between one state and the next, and it is where *Kentucky Route Zero* exists. Its characters exist in a liminal state, too. Conway is unable to move from one state to the next, from his employment at Lysette's antique shop to something better—a better job, retirement, a life free of the vices that trapped him in cycles of employment and unemployment with Lysette.

I do not know whether Cardboard Computer intended to set the game in this threshold moment, but I think it is the perfect setting for the magical realism and the critique. The economic inequality that comes with late-stage capitalism creates liminal spaces. One of the first characters Conway and Blue meet is Weaver, who they encounter at the Márquez farmhouse. Weaver was a bright student with a promising future, but tuition costs forced her to drop out of college. After that, she simply disappeared, forever stuck in the liminal space between "student" and "college graduate."

When Conway is injured in the mine, Shannon is forced to take him to a doctor or let the injury get worse and potentially kill him, even if doing so traps him in the vicious cycle of debt. The debt means another job after Lysette's closes, an indefinite delay of his retirement. None of the characters have money, and so they slip out of social visibility and deeper into a system that was designed to exploit, not support.

Conway losing his arm and leg is a slippery slope, maybe an inevitability. In a better world, there would be a path forward for him, a way for him to shake off his troubled past and retire if not successfully then peacefully. That isn't the world that *Kentucky Route Zero* offers, though, and there's no simple way for Conway to repair his often-fraught relationship with Lysette. All he can try to do is get the antiques to 5 Dogwood Drive and go out on a high note, though even that isn't attainable. He and all of the other indistinct skeletons are forever unable to cross the threshold.



Conway examines his newly healed leg while Shannon, Ezra, Blue, and Dr. Truman watch.

In Act III, Conway returns from an errand at the Hard Times Distillery with another glowing limb—the journey has literally cost him an arm and a leg. There's even less ceremony the second time, no chance for Conway to bargain or defend himself. By this time, though, the glowing skeletons are familiar. The entire distillery staff is made up of indistinct skeletons, one of the game's more magical magical realist traits.

The skeletons are never explained because they don't need to be; watching Conway fall deeper and deeper into debt before disappearing into the mass of them is explanation enough. Before they're introduced as distillery workers, a passerby calls them The Strangers. They're not all that strange or that frightening. They're just blue collar workers who have been left behind by a cruel system, going unnoticed by just about everyone except for Conway.

When Shannon expresses surprise that Conway has spoken to them, he says, "They're pretty much everywhere you look, on this river. You really haven't noticed?" This interaction is interesting because it shows the subtle divide between Shannon and Conway. They're both out of money and at risk of losing their livelihood, but it would be much harder for Conway, who is older and has a history of irregular employment, to start over than it would be for Shannon, who is younger, has less debt, and is skilled in a trade. Once Consolidated Power starts taking Conway's limbs, the divide between them grows wider until it becomes impossible to cross.

These themes are horrific not because they are boo-gory-scary but because they are, barring the appearance of glowing skeletons, present in the player's daily life. It's horrifying to watch Conway spiral and think about the dozens-hundreds-thousands of medical crowdfunding campaigns that pop up on social media every week. Conway has made mistakes, sure, but it doesn't mean he or anyone else deserves to be a victim of a predatory company and exploited for labor. It doesn't really matter, though, does it? This is the violence of a capitalist system. It punishes without regard.

Cardboard Computer doesn't use physical violence at all in *Kentucky Route Zero*, despite the game being *about* violence. The red tape Conway and Shannon must cut through to find 5 Dogwood Drive and the predatory bills Conway receives from Consolidated power are a bureaucratic violence, violence without contact. Cardboard Computer shows the violence by subverting horror tropes.

The horror tropes present in the environmental storytelling dramatically increase the impact of the game's themes. For example, many of the places Conway and Blue enter appear abandoned at first blush, though much like the abandoned place horror trope, many aren't actually empty.

However, unlike a classic horror movie or game, there's no Michael Myers or Freddy Krueger lying in wait. The buildings aren't abandoned because their occupants are dead. Some, like the Márquez Farmhouse, are empty because their owners can't afford to keep the lights on. Others, like the Echo River Central Exchange, only appear empty because Consolidated Power reduced the number of employees to the absolute minimum needed to function. (This is coincidentally called a skeleton crew, though the Central Exchange employees don't share the distillery workers' skeletal appearance.)

*Kentucky Route Zero* also uses the found footage trope often. In Act II, the Museum of Dwellings staff watches and comments on security tape footage of Conway, Blue, and Shannon exploring the museum. In Act IV, the group visits the Radvansky Center in hopes of making some money for participating in research trials. This section of the game is the same security tape found footage as the Museum of Dwellings. Instead of directing Shannon into the next area, the story progresses as the player advances a conversation between two of the Center's employees, Mimi and Jenn.

*Kentucky Route Zero's* timeline already feels impossibly stretched, but the found footage further warps the player's perception of time. At the Museum of Dwellings, the employees mention the tapes are from the previous day. By the time the group reaches the Radvansky Center, though, Mimi and Jenn speak about the tapes as though they've been sitting in a closet, forgotten, for years. Again, this isn't scary in a traditional way, where found footage shows characters being attacked. It's horrifying because the characters have little privacy, and everything they do is subject to Consolidated Power's intense scrutiny. It also introduces the idea that there's unexplained lost time in the narrative.

Another prominent horror trope *Kentucky Route Zero* leverages to emphasize its themes is the vengeful spirit. Ghosts and spirits are a mainstay of horror media, but while the spirits Conway and Shannon encounter are strange, unsettling even, they're not malicious. Weaver only appears on or near televisions, places where she can be close to Shannon. The distillery workers keep largely to themselves and speak only to one another. The twenty-eight miners who died when the Elkhorn Mines flooded remain in the mines.

The spirits are just that: spirits, and nothing more, and their appearance is a reminder of all of the lives Consolidated Power has ruined. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, the dead are not vengeful but the living are, and rightfully so. The horror tropes and the characters' existence in the liminal state emphasize the bleak reality of late capitalism, the banal villainy of a faceless corporation. There is no axe murderer waiting around the corner at the Radvansky Center. There's no river monster attacking travelers along the Echo. There's not even a villain hiding behind a Scooby-Doo mask. It's just a company choosing profit over people.



Conway, Shannon, and Blue observe the Elkhorn Mine memorial on their way to the Echo River Central Exchange.

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These themes are horrifying because players can make every correct choice but never change the game's outcome—Consolidated Power serves punishment without regard. The characters are unable to make meaningful changes in their lives because capitalism keeps people busy and it keeps people poor.

Despite all of this, *Kentucky Route Zero* is not without hope (so far). The magical realism that's so effective at pointing out the violence of late capitalism is just as useful in pointing out the good in community. When the system fails so many people, when it traps them in those liminal spaces, *Kentucky Route Zero's* characters find community and camaraderie in one another. They find joy where they can—Johnny and Junebug perform for single-digit audiences, Shannon takes solace in machines and things that can be fixed, and Ezra and Julian help the other residents of the Museum of Dwellings. When the characters meet, they're not quite friends, but they have the same scars. They take comfort in each other and survive with one another. It's still not a happy ending, but maybe it's enough for now.