

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## A Text Adventure: On Reading During Lockdown

Thomas Jellis

University of Bristol

[thomas.jellis@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:thomas.jellis@bristol.ac.uk)

---

The paper now finished, he wonders aloud: should there be an introduction of sorts? And, if so, is it enough to say that an unnamed person (who may, or may not, be the author), presents a series of reflections on trying to read during lockdown? And should he mention that it was the call for ‘shorter submissions, including the more ... impressionistic’ which caught his attention? And should he say that he's still pondering the right title, the mode of address, or the inclusion of *that* book? Perhaps.



Figure 1. Still from *Kentucky Route Zero, Act I*.

For him, like many others at the outset of lockdown, there was the prospect of finally reading those texts that had sat on the shelf for some time, untouched. Many were in the office, of course, still in boxes following a new post. He remembers, vividly, thinking about what to take home with him on his last day in that room; lockdown a ‘not-yet’, the on-going strikes at the forefront of discussion with colleagues. He chose books almost at random from the various boxes; some old favourites for reassurance, others that ought to be read; others that he may well have claimed to have read; and still others that he did not remember owning. A return to those boxed-up books seemed a remote possibility for some time, and attention turned to more immediate concerns, like the next meal, the one outing a day, the next online grocery order, the near constant tidying up. His literary diet, such as it was, consisted almost entirely of undergraduate dissertations (marking continued apace, of course) and of bedtime stories. But something was missing.



Figure 2. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act I.

Despite not reading, book orders were placed, room was found for the new arrivals on the dining table, the already heaving bedside table, and on the floorboards. The piles of books reminded him of Anne Fadiman's (2000) 'odd shelf' as much they did Walter Benjamin's (2007) musings on the mild boredom of order. It also summoned a Japanese term, *tsundoku*, which describes the practice of acquiring reading materials only to let them pile up in one's home without reading them. Smaller presses were supported, trends were followed – why not have another copy of Camus' (2013) *The Plague*? – and he started to read *On Immunity* by Eula Biss (2020), originally published in 2014. Herd immunity, public health, vaccination, risk and fear. He had almost forgotten about the H1N1 pandemic from that time. Passages resonated – 'it's through us, literally through our bodies, that certain public health measures are enacted' (34) – but it was almost too close, thematically if not stylistically, to the same themes encountered in the near-constant news article reading (undertaken, almost exclusively, on a tiny screen held tightly in his hand, and shared compulsively to different group chats).

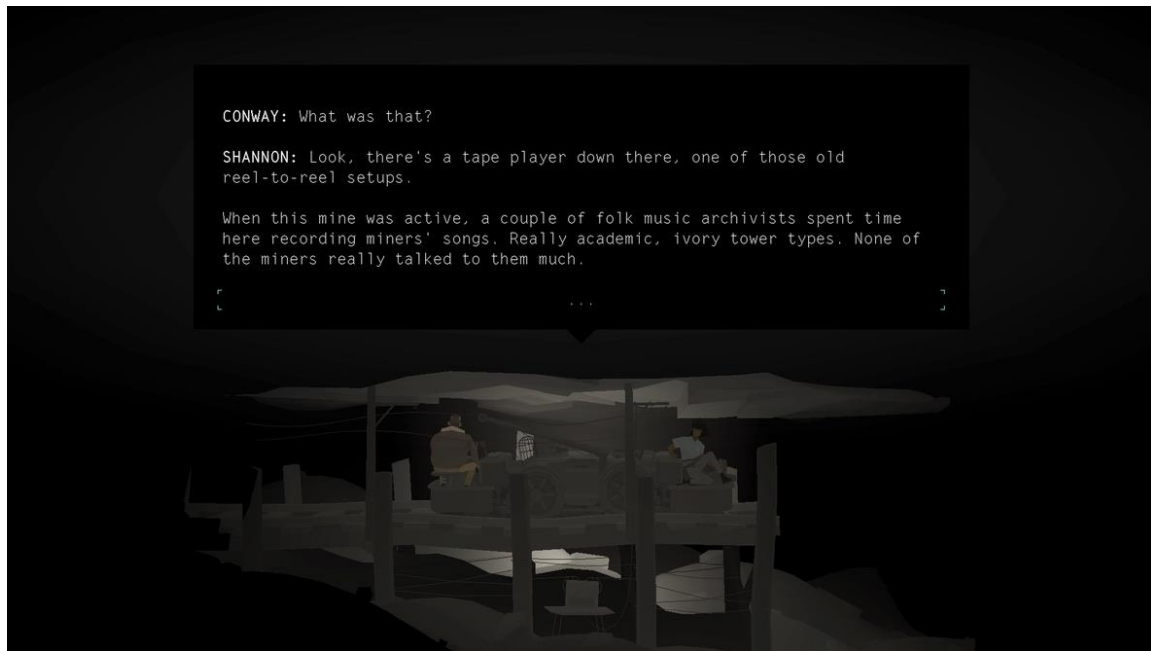


Figure 3. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act I.

Before too long, he could barely read a news article in its entirety. He might read the headline and the first paragraph, then move on to the next terrifying tidbit of news. One evening, the rest of the house asleep and at something of a loose end, he came across a short story in a back issue of magazine. He shared the piece with a close friend, along with the title of the only other text he'd read in the past month and a half: a short story by Ishiguro (2019) that had made him laugh out loud. He received a recommendation in return for another short story (McEwan 2016), with curious resonances if not coincidences. Perhaps exacerbated by lockdown, it became wonderfully liberating to speculate on what one might do, left to one's own devices, in somebody else's home. (He could not imagine that he would ever boil a shoe, nor break into a study, but who could tell?).



Figure 4. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act II.

A little while later, daydreaming about boxed books, he sought permission to return to his office. It was, reassuringly, still there and in the same mess that he had left it in. A few things had been coloured by the sunlight from not having moved for some time but all was fine. He took a pile of books home with him in the biggest bag he could find. Two months or so later, he was back in the office. Following the new one-way system through the set of buildings that comprised the workplace, he collected another pile of books (including, for no discernible reason, two copies, albeit different editions, of E.M. Cioran's (2018) *A Short History of Decay*). This time he had a list and there was some comfort in ticking off the texts once found in their boxes. There had been a naming scheme with letters and numbers on each of the boxes but now he was no longer so sure what was in 'A13/M3', or 'C5.F'. Despite little confidence he would open (still less read) any of them, he had become convinced that they ought to be a little closer to the improvised home workspace.

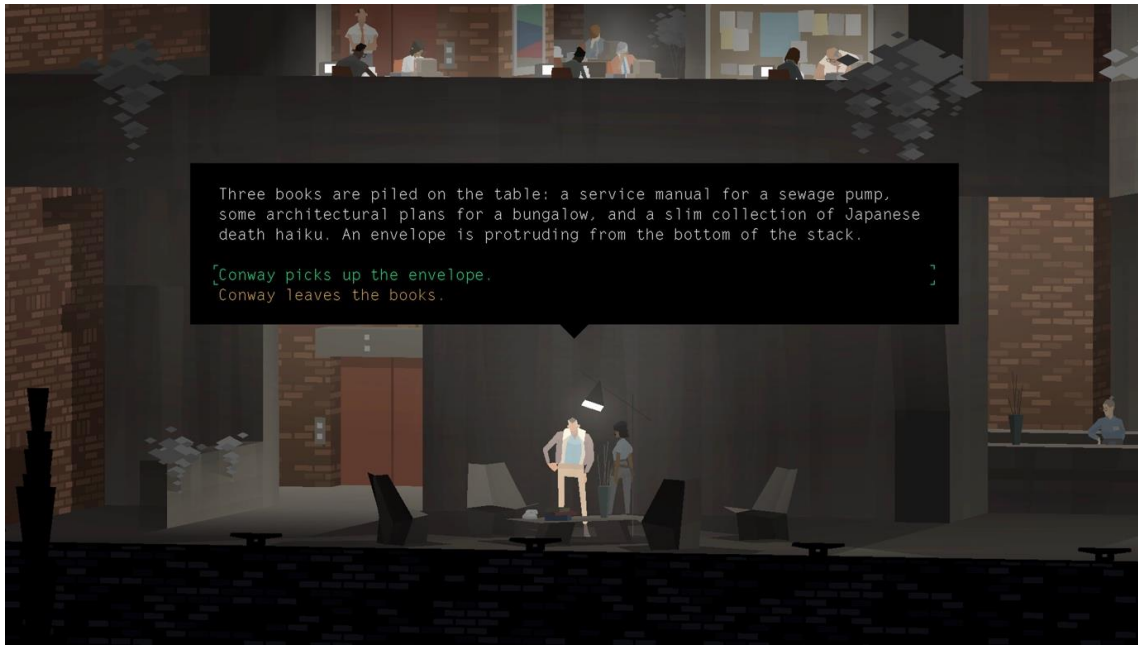


Figure 5. Still from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act II.

At some point, fairly early on in lockdown, he had come across a listicle of computer games (Stuart 2020). It was one of the few headlines that caught the attention: video games for when you're too restless to read. Initially, he had considered that the non-reading was due to not having the right books. And at times, he would catch himself worrying and think: it's only reading. It's only reading! There are more important things, surely. And he was still reading. Just not, perhaps, the right things. Like that book that was due to be discussed at the next reading group. Or that book that he needed to have read so he could draw on it for a paper. Or that book he needed to double-check for a footnote in another draft piece. And so on. Scanning the list of games for familiar names, he was reminded of one that he had started playing some seven years earlier but had never finished due to its episodic format: *Kentucky Route Zero*.

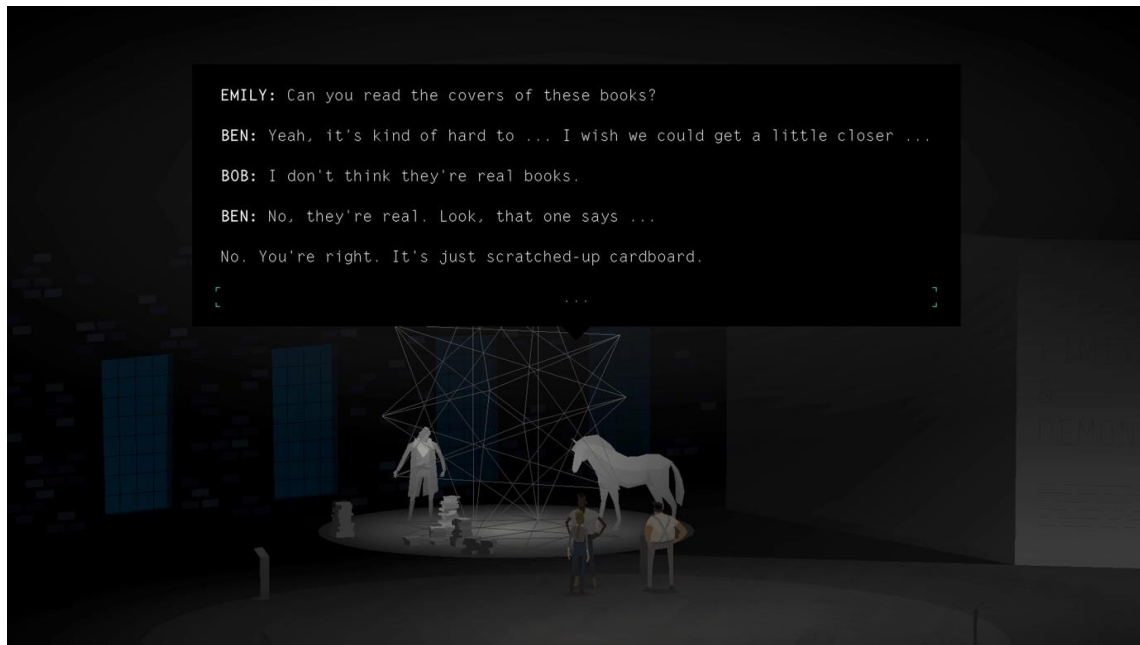


Figure 6. Figure from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Interlude: Limits and Demonstrations.

First revealed in 2011, *Kentucky Route Zero* is a game by Cardboard Computer. Its fifth and final act (or episode) had been released earlier in the year, back before lockdown. He checked the developers' website, scrolling past their description of the game ('a magical realist adventure game about a secret highway running through the caves beneath Kentucky, and the mysterious folks who travel it') to check if it included the 'interludes' that were produced in the lulls between episodic releases. They were all there: the strange art gallery, the immersive theatrical production, the phone switchboard, and more besides.



Figure 7. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act I.

It was probably at some point in Act II that he realized he was reading rather a lot of text. He'd ambled around the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, been caught up in a paper clip labyrinth, and later stumbled across a floor full of bears. It was, he was told, some kind of strange repurposed cathedral office space. Along the way, he'd named his dog Homer (but considered carefully the alternatives: Blue, or no name). His version of Conway was curious but patient. He picked up envelopes that were left lying around but drew the line at breaking into museums.





Figure 8. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act III.

He followed a map, carefully. Most of the time at least. Sometimes he would just see where the road took him. Eventually he stumbled across the eponymous route, The Zero, but even the brochure for secret tourism, with its cryptic instructions, isn't much help. The reclusive Donald, hiding in a cave with some research assistants and a huge fire, tells him what he already knew: it's a bizarre topology.

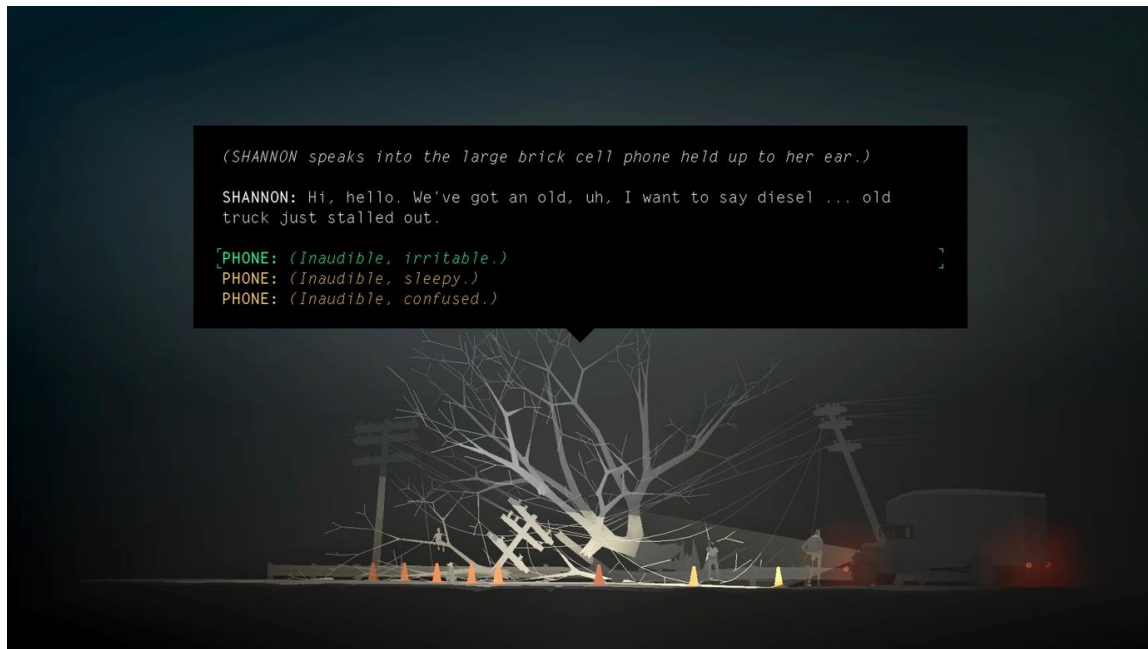


Figure 9. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act III.

It's a strange, unsettling experience playing the game. He half remembers the petrol station from the first Act, rifling through the emails received on the computer at the back, and descending beneath the station to find, of all things, some people playing a card game (who subsequently vanish). Expectations were high. This was a game included on one website's top five games of the decade and had featured in an exhibition at the V&A despite being incomplete (see Elliott et al. 2018). Perhaps what is most striking about it, he muses, is that it feels rather like limbo. Or perhaps not quite limbo, which evokes an 'extraterritoriality without walls, without corners, windows, entrances or exits' (Fox 2018: 21) but an impasse.



Figure 10. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act III.

Something doesn't feel quite right. Perhaps it was never right to begin with. But reading goes on, for now. Even if that reading is a strange text adventure. Perhaps reading is what feels like home, too. It doesn't feel right though.



Figure 11. Still from Kentucky Route Zero, Act II.

### Works Cited

- Benjamin, W. (2007) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Biss, E. (2020) *On Immunity*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Camus, A. (2013) *The Plague*. London: Penguin Books.
- Cioran, E. M. (2018) *A Short History of Decay* (trans. R. Howard). London: Penguin Books.
- Elliot, J., Kemenczy, T. and Babbitt, B. (2018) 'How to get lost in a cave.' In Foulston, M. and Volsing, K. (eds) *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt*. London: V&A Publishing, pp. 98-111.
- Fadiman, A. (2000) *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. London: Penguin Books.
- Fox, D. (2018) *Limbo*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Ishiguro, K. (2019) *Come Rain or Come Shine*. London: Faber and Faber.
- McEwan, I. (2016) *Purple Scented Novel*. London: Vintage.
- Stuart, K. (2020) 'Novel adventures: 12 video games for when you're too restless to read.' *The Guardian*, 28 April 2020.