

Music and the Video Game as Ritual Encounter

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[Biography: Tim Summers is Lecturer in Music at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he researches music in popular culture. He is the author of *Understanding Video Game Music* and helps to organize the Ludomusicology conferences on game music and sound.]

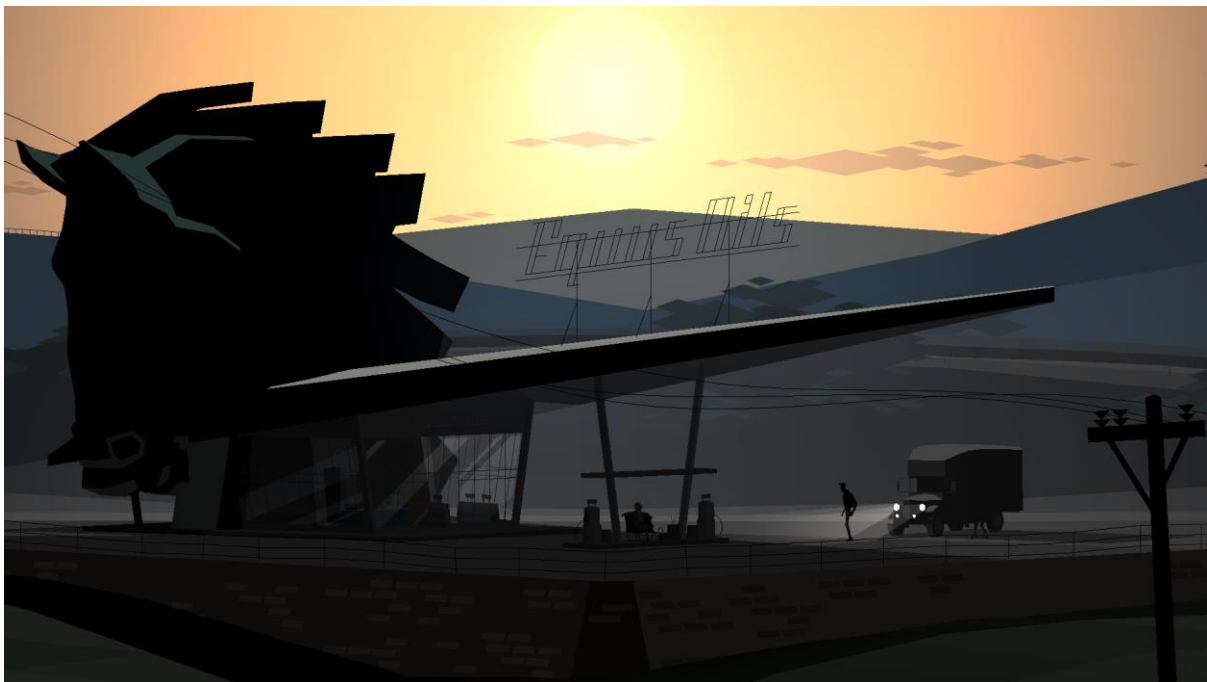


Figure 1: The opening of *Kentucky Route Zero*, in which the player is introduced to Conway.

Even though (at time of writing) the final part of Cardboard Computer's [Kentucky Route Zero](#) is yet to be released, I still count it among my favourite video games, one that provides a deeply emotional and affecting experience. As some readers may know, this point-and-click adventure follows world-weary antiques delivery-driver Conway on his mission to complete what is apparently his 'final delivery' (Figure 1). As Conway seeks to locate the destination, he finds himself entangled in a series of curious events and caught up in the lives of other characters. Adding to the sense of mystery, the game – which presents what its creators

describe as a 'magical realist adventure' – frequently adopts an experimental approach to chronology, cause-and-effect, perspective and space. For instance, the titular road is represented as circular, but different locations appear and disappear along the highway, depending on the combination of clockwise and anticlockwise travel. Elsewhere, a forest is rendered with an impossible perspective, so that objects and characters seem to be at once in front of, and behind, the trees, much like René Magritte's painting *Le Blanc-Seing* (Figure 2).

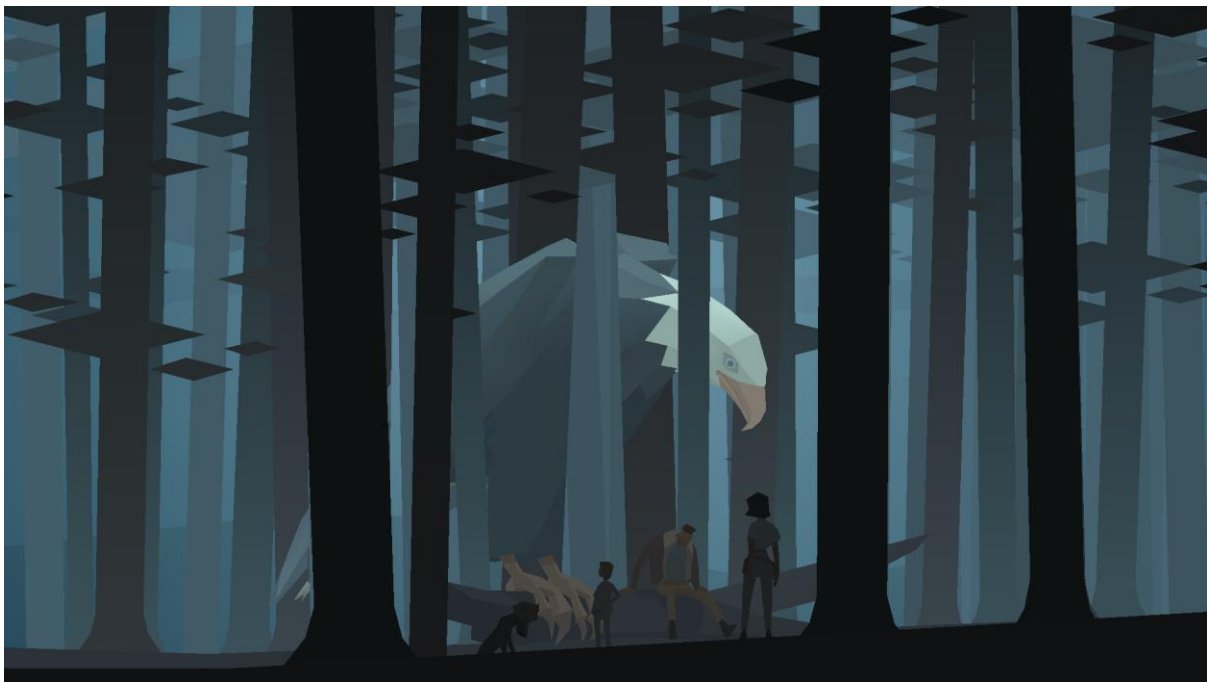


Figure 2: The impossible perspective of the Forest.

In another section of the game, Conway and others find a partially-constructed 'Museum of Dwellings': a large exhibition space housing different houses – a bit like [St Fagans National Museum of History](#) which collects and re-erects buildings inside the museum grounds. In the game, the player directs Conway to explore the exhibits as a way to advance the story (Figure 3). In response to the player's (and Conway's) actions, on-screen text appears, which is dialogue spoken by the museum staff, recounting Conway's visit and commenting on his actions after the fact (even though the player is witnessing and enacting the visit at that moment). While this is a video game, and despite the temporal

disjunction, here the player visits a virtual museum and engages with exhibition-going in order to progress through the game.



Figure 3: The Museum of Dwellings.

A couple of years ago, the museum sequence of *Kentucky Route Zero* found an additional parallel when the game featured in the exhibition [Design, Play, Disrupt](#) held at London's V&A Museum, an exhibition intended to illustrate the connections and interplay between video games and other art forms. *Kentucky Route Zero* provided an excellent case: its references to the world of theatre, literature and visual art are well known and have been acknowledged by its creators, besides critics and fans. The game's theatrical-dramatic aspect is especially clear. *Kentucky Route Zero* comprises five parts, called 'acts', split into 'scenes', each announced with a title card. Besides the acts, there are intermissions. The intermission between the first two acts, titled '[Limits and Demonstrations](#)' (Figure 4), takes the form of a virtual art exhibition, a retrospective of the work of an in-game character, Lula Chamberlain. The player is invited to wander around the exhibition, appreciating the artwork and reading the notes which help to fill in the backstory to the main game. In the second intermission, '[The Entertainment](#)' (Figure 5), the player watches the

performance of a stage play. With a set also designed by Chamberlain, the play again enriches the fictional world presented by the game.

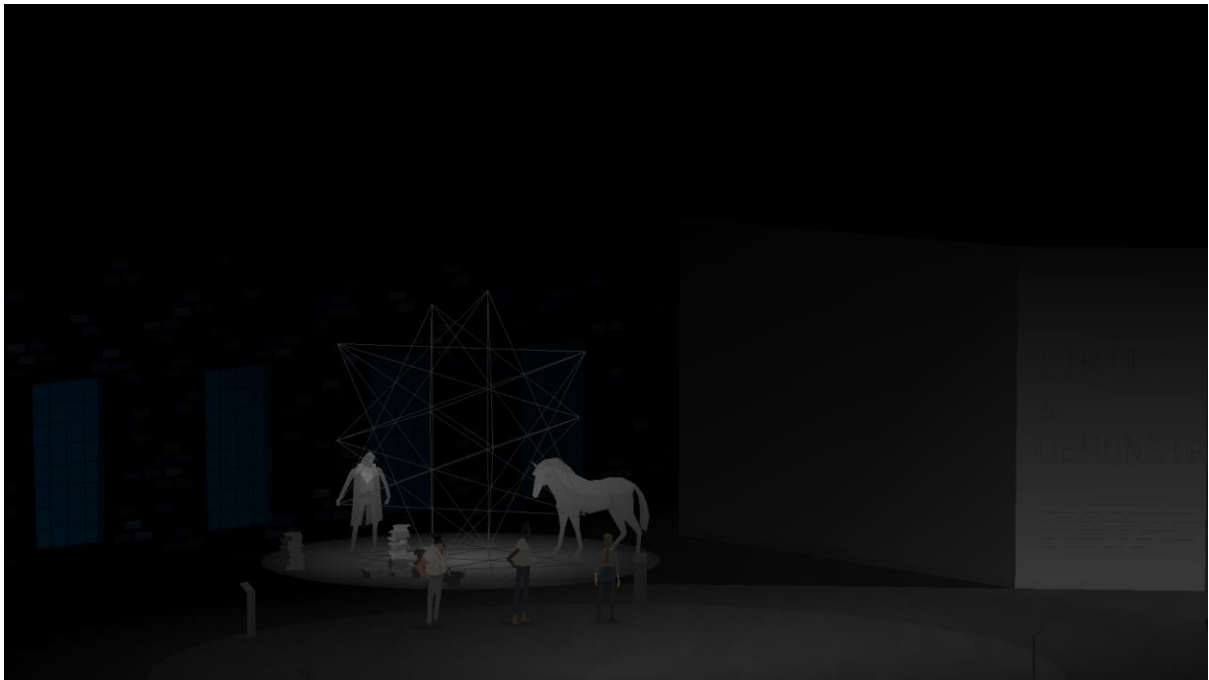


Figure 4: Limits and Demonstrations



Figure 5: The Entertainment

Kentucky Route Zero's explicit engagement with the museum, the stage play and the practicalities of spectatorship is curious. Yes, these sequences take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the museum and the theatre for interactive games, but perhaps even more striking is

how smoothly these ritual spaces are integrated into the form of a video game. In her essay [‘What is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century?’](#), Dorothea von Hantelmann discusses both theatre and museum, tracing how the form and development of each reflects differing conceptions of society. In the case of the theatre, actors and stage dramas ‘act out the conflicts between the individual and the collective’ on behalf of the audience, while this audience is confined, bound by rules and conventions to watch, listen and appreciate the stage action, over which spectators – grouped together as a single unit – have no agency. Von Hantelmann writes:

The strength of this modality lies in creating a collective body and organizing it [...] In being bundled, focused, and oriented towards the stage, the heterogeneous energies of the many become a collective body.

Von Hantelmann goes on to suggest that the restrictive organization of the theatre did not mesh well with modern conceptions of liberal individualism, better reflected in the ascendancy of museum-going, with its emphasis on the visitor as individual agent, able to move around the space and engage with the exhibits on their own terms. The exhibition, she writes,

became the central ritual structure of our time because it mirrors the socioeconomic parameters of modern Western industrialized societies [...] Museums and exhibitions [...] enact categories and concepts that historically were and (mostly) still are fundamental to modern Western liberal market societies [...] the individual, the object, the market, progress, pluralism—have been and continue to be embodied, enacted, practiced, and cultivated through this ritual.

Von Hantelmann finishes her essay by speculating on the potential of a new ritual space for the twenty-first century, one that would serve to ameliorate the separation and sterile disconnectedness of the museum. My suggestion in this essay is that video games offer one such space, not least because they blend qualities of both the exhibition and the theatre –

as epitomized so explicitly by *Kentucky Route Zero*. Furthermore, I claim that music is an important component of the video game and serves to articulate its ritual enactment.

Between museum and theatre

Like traditional rituals, video games present special sites marked off from everyday life. In the case of games, these are spaces of play, the so-called 'magic circles' of space and time in which only the rules of the game apply – rules to which gamers freely subject themselves. Gamers may play alone, alongside others in the same physical space or connected virtually; they may play together at the same time or asynchronously – at different times, progressing at different speeds, making different choices, and so on.

To use Von Hantelmann's terms, games are both individualized experiences like museum attendance, because of the agency afforded each player to make choices, but also collective experiences like theatre-going, because of the rigidity of the rules. Even if gamers play the game at different times, there is a coherence or likeness to their experiences because they are subject to the same rules and parameters (cheating and adaptation aside). The result is that communities – huge, global, virtual – are created through the shared ritual of game-playing. My proposal is that music is significant to the ritual qualities of video games. The following paragraphs outline five ways in which this significance can be experienced and understood.

1. Music and ritualistic repetition

Music helps to provide ritual structures for games. It reflects and re-enacts the repetitiousness of the medium and it articulates the stages and phases of playing the game.

Just as (according to Von Hantelmann) 'formalized, repeated gestures' are characteristic of rituals, so repetition is significant for the video game. We anticipate that the game will apply the same rules in the same way each

time it is played, and we also expect games to involve similar gameplay mechanics throughout the game (a motorsports game will consist of racing gameplay throughout, a shooting game will be anchored in a representation of firearm combat, and so on). As a result, music in games is typically segmented and [‘modular’ to some extent](#), most often relying on seamlessly looped or repeatedly-played pieces of music. Just as the gameplay repeats, so does the music. Even generative music systems for games like [Spore](#) or [No Man’s Sky](#) maintain a high degree of constancy of instrumentation, affect, texture and harmonic language, if not precise repetition.

Like any ritual, games balance the certainty and constancy of the ritual process with the uniqueness of each re-enactment. Games bring about this balance partly in response to the player. Even if the same music plays as a loop for the entire game round (such as in *Tetris* for the GameBoy), the particular number of repetitions will depend on the player’s actions, which introduce an element of indeterminacy or variability into the system. Like religious services that balance unchanging sections with tailored elements, games – and their music – balance consistency with recognition that each game round is a new enactment of the ritual. Given this ritualistic repetition, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the best-loved video game music is heard repeatedly throughout the game in which it features.

Music also articulates the large-scale structure of video games. It is common to find music attached to particular stages in the game, from launching the application to the main menu, loading screens, cutscenes, events of the gameplay, the win/lose conclusion, and so on. As musical change delimits the specific segments of the game experience, it articulates the particular structure of the ritual, like the acts of a play, the rooms of an exhibition, or parts of a service.

We may even find responsorial musical moments in games. Gamers may react to musical changes, or, as is often the case in games with depictions of musical performance, may present musical responses to the

game. In *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, for instance, players learn to perform melodies on a virtual ocarina in order to trigger, and respond to, events in the game's world. *Kentucky Route Zero* primarily uses looped cues which repeat until a musical change is triggered by the player's actions. Players prompt the musical progression through the game, from section to section, through their dramatic choices.

2. Music and the marking of ritual spaces and time-periods?

Music in games helps to build virtual spaces and geographies for play. The music marks these sites of ritual as different from everyday reality.

Games use music to build their virtual worlds. Musical associations, signs and topics are invoked to draw on associations to elaborate upon the (often limited) visual properties of the game, enriching the projected reality. We might think of how [Skyrim uses orchestral music to evoke particular qualities of landscape](#), or how [Bioshock's popular music constructs its dystopia](#). Different islands in the Great Sea of *Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* have particular music attached to them, distinguishing each location. As a result, to explore the world geographically is also to explore it musically: musical change equates with geographic change. In addition, musical change can outline our progression through levels of the game, charting our journey.

Von Hantelmann argues that one of the key features of the museum is the visitor's freedom to move around the space and adopt a multiplicity of perspectives. We find similar agency afforded by the virtual spaces of games. Though players' movement is normally restricted in some way, their spatial and physical adventure is recognized and accentuated by music. Games typically feature music as soon as players begin to engage with them, even before they have an opportunity to explore the fictional world. By accompanying and highlighting players' engagement with the game, music marks out this time-period as special, different from quotidian reality. A sonic aura, if you like, is provided for this site and duration of play, giving action a ritual atmosphere, especially when music

seems to emanate from an unexplained invisible source. Both by using music to create the virtual spaces of games, and by distinguishing the time of gaming from normal reality, music helps to demarcate (and even encourage) a ritual engagement.

In *Kentucky Route Zero*, for example, Appalachian folk music helps situate the game in a specific geographic and cultural context, even though relatively little of the actual landscape is seen (Figure 6). The ambient musical style, which lacks rhythmic drive and tonal propulsion, provides the experience with a reflective, meditative sonic atmosphere.



Figure 6: The Appalachian musicians.

3. Music and rule-based individualism

Music typically reacts to player engagement in distinct ways. As such, music helps to articulate a ritual space that at once responds to the individual agency of the player, but also unifies players as a single community because gamers are all treated similarly.

It is straightforward to link the particular processes of rituals with the rule-bound constructs of games. Games routinely use music to bolster their ludic processes: we might think of music that betrays the presence of enemies or the count-down of a time limit, or even music that celebrates success or commiserates failure. Interactive games are

characterized by a different power dynamic to the theatre, which has not traditionally afforded members of the audience individual agency. Yet neither are players the atomized visitors to an exhibition, to which the artefacts and processes remain indifferent. The playful space of games is formed by particular rules that are consistently applied, yet it also responds to the actions of each individual player and each instance of play. Through reacting to players, but doing so according to specific processes, music is a clear agent for articulating this balance between the individual participant and community of players as a unified whole. *Kentucky Route Zero* goes further, thematizing musical performance as a playful act within the game. At one point in the game, the musical duo Junebug and Johnny perform a serene, 'dream pop' song at a bar. As Junebug sings, accompanied by Johnny, the ceiling of the bar gently opens up to the night sky in a surreal, transcendent moment. Players can choose the lines that Junebug sings, tailoring the performance within the given options, and thus explicitly seizing and personalizing music's agentive qualities (Figure 7).

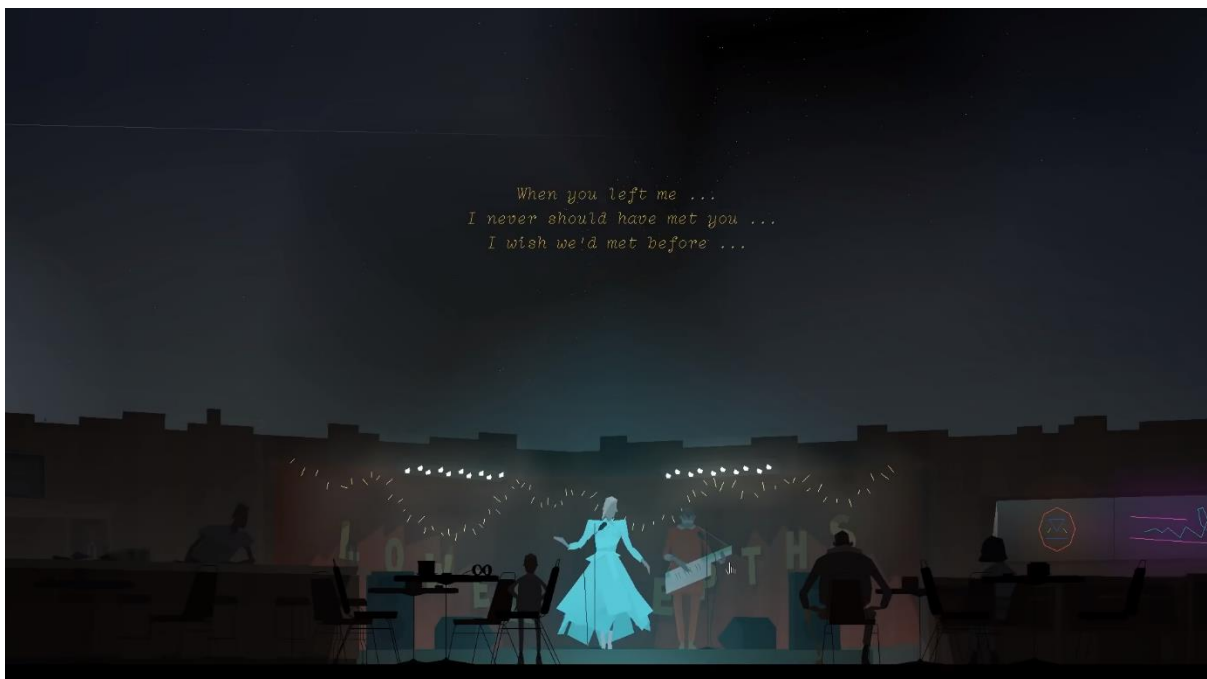


Figure 7: Junebug and Johnny's performance at the bar.

4. Music, avatars and identity

Music helps players to engage with complex constructions of identity. It links players with the roles and characters they portray in the reality of the game, which can be very different to those of their daily lives.

Rituals often involve complicated encounters between participants, ritual leaders and objects/entities of contemplation. It is for this reason that Von Hantelmann emphasizes self/other encounters in an exhibition, describing the way that the theatre prompts 'distanced self-reference by directing [audience members'] focus toward something that represent[s] themselves'. For Von Hantelmann, the theatre emphasizes audiences' identification with the stage representation; and the exhibition emphasizes separation and distance between the viewer and the object. Like theatre, games also typically feature some kind of representation with which we can identify. But even as we are bound to them, these avatars can often be markedly different to our day-to-day identities. Indeed, that sense of identifying with difference is often part of the attraction: the fun in playing as Lara Croft or Master Chief comes to a large extent from the 'exotic' distance between my reality and the persona I adopt in the game.

Music can articulate the complex role-playing of games, at once anchored to the player's actions and yet bound to the avatar character. Listening to the radio in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* helps me to 'hear through [the hero] CJ's ears', [as Kiri Miller describes](#); the James Bond theme in the *GoldenEye 007* game invokes the character's history from the film series; and the tight synchronization of music with the actions of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (2013) draws me into a closer bond with the heroine. Just as rituals present negotiations between self, other and community, these opportunities to engage with other identities represent encounters that take me beyond my personal perspective. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, as the music reacts to Conway's actions, directed by the player, we are linked to the avatar. We listen to his world and the audiotrack, including music, articulates his subjective perspective. In

doing so, we share in his strange and unusual experiences during the game.

5. Game music and culture beyond games

Rituals are at once distinguished from everyday reality, yet they are closely bound to society and culture. Music is one of the ways that video games fulfil similar ritual functions by engaging groups of people beyond the playing time of games.

Rituals are both representative of, and responsive to, broader socio-cultural trends. Fundamentally, the significance of the ritual is not bounded by the time and space of the enacted event. The same is true of video games, and this is particularly clear in the cultures of appreciation that have emerged around the music: game music fandom has long been recognized as a widespread and diverse cultural phenomenon.

Video game music helps to build communities. From [participatory cultures of chiptune musicians composing music using \(or emulating\) video game technology](#), through [video game cover bands](#), to listeners of [radio programmes dedicated to game music](#), that music becomes a meeting point for communicates to coalesce and interact. Certain methods of purchasing *Kentucky Route Zero*, for example, include the soundtrack album, for separate listening outside the game. YouTube uploads of the game's music become shared spaces for listening to, and discourse about, the score. In addition, the touring video game music concert series [Video Games Live](#) presents events at which members of such communities come together in a particularly visible and physically embodied way, and enact another ritual in the physical world.

The Danish game theorist and designer [Jesper Juul](#) famously described games as 'half-real', because they blend real rules with fictional worlds. This half-realness facilitates the ritual properties of games, not least manifested in their music which flows between worlds, realities and communities.

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If the theatre is too homogenizing and restrictive, and the museum too isolating, then games occupy a middleground of play. *Kentucky Route Zero's* depictions of museums and performances make this middleground particularly telling, but the example merely provides an explicit manifestation of aspects of engaging with games more generally evident in games. It is helpful to recognize the ritual qualities of games, their structural framework, social functions and connectedness to past forms of ritual. These ritual discussions can then help to illuminate how games create a powerful and compelling aesthetic experience, and how music is an important part of this experience.