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Touch - Nostalgia and the Absurd in an Interactive Cosmology

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Abstract: Touch is a narrative-driven game centered around interacting with an imitative retro computer system and unraveling different layers of the possible universe. It offers a reinterpretation of existentialist themes as articulated in Albert Camus's The Myth of Sisyphus. The value of human existence lies not in the pursuit of an ultimate endpoint or absolute meaning, but in the continuous process of exploration and the affirmation of one's being through that ongoing journey. By integrating a recognizable interface with surreal modes of interaction, Touch constructs a temporal bridge between past and future. Through a retrospective perspective anchored in early cognitive experience, it enables an anticipatory engagement with futurity. Despite the perceived insignificance of the individual, Touch highlights the concreteness of embodied existence.

Tags: Game, Media Art

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1 Introduction

The origins of Touch lie in a long-standing preoccupation with existential questions that first emerged in childhood. Early attempts to articulate inquiries such as “What is a human? Why am I not a rabbit?” revealed both the difficulty of translating adult philosophical concerns for a child’s understanding and the persistence of such questions across time. Later encounters with scientific explanations, particularly the cosmological account of carbon as a fundamental element forged in the cores of stars and circulated through successive cycles of life and death, offered an alternative perspective on existence. This continuous recycling of matter resonates with the myth of Sisyphus, in which human life is framed through repetition, futility, and resilience. These reflections provided the conceptual foundation for a creative exploration of absurdity, persistence, and meaning-making. Touch is a narrative experiment presented in the form of a game, first released on itch.io in April 2025 under the name supernova191919. At its core, the game investigates the condition of absurdity as theorized by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus: although the world is absurd, vitality emerges from embracing the experience of existence within that absurdity. This philosophical concern is translated into interactive design through mechanics that foreground repetition, uncertainty, and the instability of meaning.

The game’s interface emulates the Windows 98 operating system with such meticulous attention to detail that, in the absence of background music, players may momentarily question whether they are interacting with a game or with an actual computer environment. This blurring of the boundary between the real and the virtual is central to the work’s narrative strategy. At the center of the experience is Alice’s Brain, a system assistant inspired by Microsoft’s Clippit, who guides players through three stages of interaction. Each stage reveals deeper layers of a hidden, universe-spanning narrative, interweaving astrophysical theories with surreal writing. Through this design, Touch positions itself as both a philosophical reflection and a narrative experiment: an attempt to render the experience of absurdity in playable form.

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Please note: the embedded interactive version takes more time to load ;) Use full screen for the full experience.

2 Absurdity

It is difficult to determine precisely when the myth of Sisyphus was first encountered. Although no empirical data are available to demonstrate the extent of its recognition, anecdotal evidence suggests that, when the figure is described as “the man pushing the stone,” European audiences generally understand the allusion. What is particularly noteworthy is that the punishment is often remembered more vividly than the tragic figure himself. This disproportionate emphasis highlights the absurdity of the myth: the task is simple to comprehend yet impossible to complete. Sisyphus is condemned to expend endless effort in pushing a massive stone uphill, only to watch it roll back again. The gods judged that the most dreadful punishment was perpetual, futile labor.

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In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus famously declares: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”. camus2005myth For Camus, suicide is not a rejection of absurdity but rather its ultimate acknowledgment. In contrast, evasion—refusing to confront death—constitutes a denial of the absurd. This raises a central question: what, then, makes life worth living? Camus identifies four conditions that inevitably lead to the experience of absurdity: the repetitive and mechanical nature of daily life; the awareness that time is steadily eroding human existence; the recognition of an unavoidable end in death; and the profound sense of abandonment in an universe. For Camus, absurdity cannot—and need not—be eliminated. The possibility of happiness lies instead in directly confronting the absurd: like Sisyphus under the weight of his punishment, the individual achieves freedom through lucid recognition of life’s condition.

In this sense, the myth functions as a mirror of human existence, which is characterized by the inseparability of happiness and absurdity. As Camus s, “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable”(p. 118). This idea informed the design of one of the core mechanics in the game under discussion: tasks structured around repetitive, seemingly futile actions. In one level, the player encounters a simulated file-download interface reminiscent of Windows 98. A familiar progress bar appears but freezes at 99%. A blinking cursor trails the number, accompanied by the prompt: “Get trapped? Have you ever thought about rewriting your fate?” If the player attempts to edit the number, the progress bar paradoxically decreases rather than advances. Completion is achieved only when the value is reduced to zero. This endless loop mirrors the myth of Sisyphus: the stone is pushed upward repeatedly, only to roll back just before reaching the summit. Each return to the beginning is both an end and a new beginning—the closure of one cycle and the inevitable commencement of another.

3 What Are We Nostalgic for?

Before examining how nostalgic elements are woven into the narrative framework of Touch, it is necessary to clarify what contemporary nostalgia signifies. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement—where artificial intelligence proliferates, data storage is miniaturized to the scale of a business card, and software such as Flash Player has already passed into obsolescence—the question arises: what precisely continues to evoke longing for the past? For a generation raised amid the futuristic optimism of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the collapse of such imagined futures has produced a pervasive sense of disorientation. Nostalgia today functions less as an attempt to recover specific memories than as a strategy for coping with an uncertain future. As Tannar observes, nostalgia often thrives during periods of disruption, offering continuity when the trajectory of progress no longer feels stable. *Tanner (2020)*

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This shift is reflected in cultural and media consumption patterns. A critical text presented by supernova191919 at CSM SHOWS 25 argued that contemporary nostalgia operates primarily as a coping mechanism for unpredictability rather than as a simple reconnection with past experiences. Market data reinforces this perspective. According to official SteamDB figures, the annual release volume of games tagged “retro” grew substantially between 2019 and 2024, with increases of 299 titles between 2019 and 2020 and 355 titles between 2023 and 2024.Figure 1 YouTube’s Culture & Trends reports from 2019–2024 show similar tendencies: viewers consistently gravitated toward familiar and comfort-oriented content, with nostalgia-heavy verticals such as retrogaming growing dramatically. During the COVID-19 pandemic, YouTube documented that 82% of Gen Z viewers reported using the platform specifically to feel nostalgic.Hyper link By 2023, uploads in retrogaming categories had grown more than 1,000× compared to 2007 levels, indicating that this nostalgia-driven orientation persisted even beyond the acute crisis years.

Within this cultural framework, the choice of Windows 98 as the aesthetic foundation for Touch is deliberate. Launched on June 25, 1998, Windows 98 marked a transitional moment in the history of personal computing. It was the first Microsoft operating system explicitly designed for home users, accelerating the domestic adoption of PCs. Its integration of Internet Explorer 4.0 introduced many to the World Wide Web for the first time, while support for DirectX made the platform ideal for gaming. Iconic titles such as StarCraft, Age of Empires, and The Sims are often associated with this period, which is widely remembered as the golden era of PC gaming and multimedia.

For many in Generations Y and Z, memories of Windows 98 are inseparable from their first direct interactions with digital interfaces and online culture. As such, the Windows 98 environment functions not only as a technical platform but also as a powerful cultural signifier—one that evokes both personal and collective nostalgia. By reconstructing this interface with meticulous attention to detail, Touch situates itself within this historical moment, addressing an audience that grew up alongside these early digital experiences while critically examining why the future no longer appears as luminous as it once did.

The endurance of nostalgic consumption cannot be separated from wider socioeconomic instability. The global labor market’s abrupt downturn over this period intensified uncertainty for younger generations, particularly those at the threshold of long-term planning. Within this context, nostalgia offers a temporary refuge: not necessarily a rejection of the future, but a means of grounding oneself when the future feels fragmented or inaccessible.

Touch positions itself within this cultural moment. As a retro-inspired narrative experiment, it does not merely recreate the aesthetics of the Windows 98 environment, but reflects critically on why the future has lost its once-compelling appeal. By embedding repetition, absurdity, and re-imagined interfaces, the game stages nostalgia not as escapism but as a means to engage with disrupted temporality—inviting both players and its designer to reconsider how one might look forward again.

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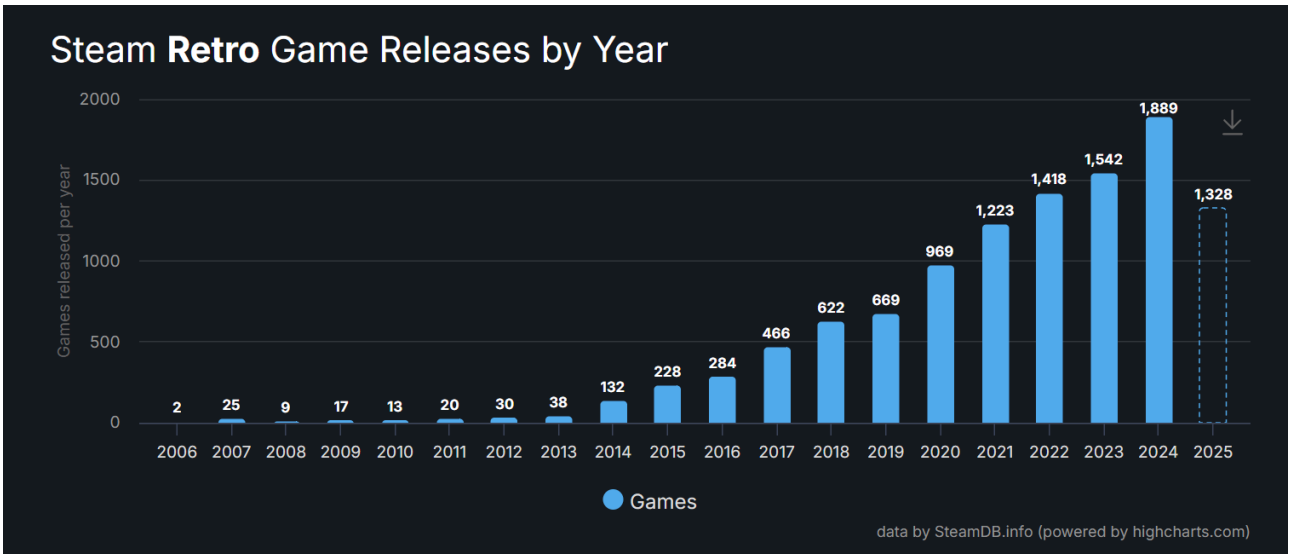

Figure 1: Steam Retro Game Releases by Year.Hyper link

4 Magic Circle

The magic circle has been theorized as a space where artificial rules and virtual realities temporarily suspend the structures of everyday life. *Tekinbas & Zimmerman (2003)* The play-state has been described as a protective frame separating the player from the “real” world and its problems, producing an enchanted zone in which no harm can come. *Apter (1982)* The magic circle, therefore, operates as a maker of time: much like a clock, it delineates both a beginning and an end, while paradoxically enabling a path without clear boundaries. It constructs a repeatable space—finite in form yet infinite in possibility.

Despite its potency, the magic circle is inherently fragile and demands continual maintenance to remain intact. Every game unfolds within a specially demarcated temporal and spatial frame that signals to players, whether consciously or unconsciously, that play is taking place. To sustain this delicate frame, players tacitly adhere to the rules that constitute it, thereby enacting and reinforcing their roles within its boundaries.

Extending this concept, a parallel can be drawn between the magic circle of play and the broader frame that human societies construct around the universe. Through symbolic systems, cultural frameworks, and social contracts, societies generate a protective circle that offers order, meaning, and a sense of security. Within this socially constructed frame, life becomes structured, intelligible, and manageable. Yet, stepping beyond this circle—confronting the raw vastness and indifference of the universe—can produce profound existential unease. As in play, the magic circle of human civilization provides not only a domain of possibility but also a shelter from the overwhelming

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chaos beyond.

In continuity with the earlier discussion of nostalgia, the meticulous simulation of the Windows 98 interface in Touch functions as a mechanism for blurring the boundaries between the real and the virtual. By embedding gameplay within this familiar digital shell, the work reproduces a recognizable frame of safety. It thereby enables players to experience both the pleasures of nostalgic immersion and the invitation to reflect critically on realities that extend beyond the pixelated surface.

5 Universe

There is a notable structural analogy between the universe, computer systems, and human life. Computer systems are designed on the basis of human experiences, while human life itself is shaped by the laws of the universe. This analogy serves as the initial narrative foundation for Touch. The universe can be conceived as a vast computational system, governed by physical laws functioning as algorithms and producing stars as the visible results of its operations.

Since the 1930s, several cosmological models have theorized the cyclical nature of the universe. Among the most prominent are: (1) the Oscillating Universe Model, which posits infinite cycles of expansion (Big Bang) and contraction (Big Crunch); (2) the Big Bounce Theory, which suggests that each Big Bang is preceded by the collapse of a previous universe; and (3) Conformal Cyclic Cosmology (CCC), proposed by Roger Penrose, which envisions a succession of “aeons” in which the remote future of one universe becomes the Big Bang of the next. Despite their differences, these models converge on a shared premise: the universe is not a singular, linear event, but an endless sequence of birth, death, and renewal. This cyclical vision imbues the cosmos with a form of vitality, in which destruction and creation are inseparably intertwined. This cosmological perspective resonates with Camus’s allegory of Sisyphus, whose eternal ascent epitomizes the absurdity of repetition without resolution. Just as the universe expands and collapses in perpetuity, so too does Sisyphus endlessly push the stone uphill only to see it fall again. Both narratives confront existence as an infinite cycle: indifferent, unresolvable, and yet generative. In this sense, the cyclical models of cosmology mirror the human condition under the absurd—life persists through repetition, and meaning emerges not from transcendence but from continuous engagement with the cycle itself. In Touch, this cosmological framework is translated into mechanics and narrative structure. Players traverse layered dimensions that mirror the cycles of expansion and collapse, thereby engaging with a dynamic representation of cosmological rhythms. The two-dimensional environment—clickable icons, flat surfaces, and fixed pixel boundaries—is occasionally interrupted by three-dimensional animations. These insertions are not merely aesthetic; they create structural tension within the spatial frame, suggesting hidden complexity and randomness beneath the surface. This resonates with the philosophical view of space as a

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condition of perception rather than an independent property of objects. *Kant & Maley (2024)* The theme of temporality is similarly foregrounded. In Touch, this insight informs the design of a Date/Time Properties page and an interactive clock scene. Here, the player is required to reverse the flow of time from the stage of the Big Crunch back to the origin of the current cycle—the Big Bang. Three rotating clocks represent the past, present, and future; as time is reversed, the game's spatial environment expands rather than collapses, suggesting a return to the conditions in which both time and space emerge.

Further, the game draws on speculative frameworks such as superstring theory. According to Hawking, the fundamental constituents of the universe may be conceived as one-dimensional "strings," whose vibrational modes correspond to different particles. *Hawking (2001)* For mathematical consistency, this model requires ten or eleven spatial dimensions, with the additional dimensions compactified beyond detection. In Touch, these abstractions are reimagined in the form of an executable file, pulse.exe. Upon completion of this segment, the player "downloads" a folder named pulse, which contains eleven subfolders, each corresponding to one of the proposed dimensions. This design reflects a narrative interpretation of string theory, emphasizing metaphorical engagement rather than literal scientific accuracy. The term pulse simultaneously invokes the rhythms of biological life and the vibrational modes of strings, pointing to the transition from zero to infinite possibility. As players ascend through these successive dimensions, the sense of progression is deliberately unsettled. The apparent expansion of possibility culminates not in transcendence but in return: the system ultimately requires the player to cycle back to the beginning. This enforced repetition mirrors the absurd logic of Sisyphus's journey, in which each ascent is inevitably followed by descent. In this design, dimensional escalation and cyclical return are bound together, underscoring the absurdity of striving within a universe where every advance is entwined with recurrence.

6 Drawing in Time, with the Palette of Things

Among the default applications included in Windows 98, MS Paint occupies a particularly significant place in the cultural memory of early personal computing. In a period when network connectivity was limited, Paint often served as a medium of casual engagement once games had been exhausted. The act of drawing—such as beginning with a small sun in the corner of the canvas, accompanied by radiating lines to represent light—demonstrates how individuals externalize cognition through symbolic representation. In this sense, Paint may be regarded as a witness board for human perception, recording how users translate inner concepts into visible forms.

In Touch, the earlier sections of the game primarily direct attention outward, toward the construction of worldviews and the exploration of cosmological possibilities. The final Paint

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sequence, by contrast, shifts focus inward, foregrounding human experience itself. The drawing tools are reimagined as temporal metaphors: the pencil, brush, and spray can correspond respectively to the past, present, and future. Their functionality emphasizes the temporal asymmetry of human existence. Pencil and brush marks are visible during the act of drawing, but the spray can leaves no trace, regardless of size or color. The design thus represents the invisibility of the future, while underscoring that present actions nonetheless determine future outcomes.

Once the drawing is saved, the hidden traces of the spray can are revealed, while the pencil marks disappear and the brush strokes remain. This logic embodies a temporal philosophy: the past recedes, the present persists, and the future—once invisible—emerges retrospectively. The mechanics thus frame painting not merely as aesthetic activity but as an allegory of temporal existence, where human life is bounded by the immediacy of the present and the deferred visibility of what is to come.

At the conclusion of this sequence, the system requires the player to upload the drawing—conceived as a record of time and memory—into the cosmos. This act completes a cycle of creation and delivery: the player externalizes personal experience through painting, and then relinquishes it to the universe. In doing so, the work situates individual memory within a cosmic horizon, highlighting the relation between finite human temporality and infinite cosmic scale. Touch suggests a more inclusive perspective. The cosmos does not reject or negate what is given to it; rather, it absorbs and preserves these fragments of human experience as part of its ongoing cycles. The act of uploading thus becomes more than a gesture of resignation—it is also an affirmation of belonging, in which human creations, however ephemeral, are received and integrated into the boundless continuity of the universe.

7 Sound Design

The soundtrack of Touch was developed in collaboration with sound artist MULU. Hyper link Of particular interest is the composition associated with the Folder level, where the music conveys a granular and pressing texture. Hyper link This section demonstrates how sound design functions as a narrative instrument, shaping the atmosphere of play. In discussions with MULU, the designer of Touch explained that this level corresponds to an exploration of the universe in which the player ascends through successively higher dimensions, echoing the Sisyphean cycle of perpetual “climbing.”

MULU’s composition for this sequence draws upon Olivier Messiaen’s theory of modes of limited transposition. These scales, which repeat after a small number of transpositions, are structurally symmetrical and lack a conventional tonic–dominant orientation. The absence of tonal directionality creates a sense of suspension, reinforcing themes of repetition and futility central to

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the game's narrative of absurdity. In Touch, the modal structures are paired with muted, percussive electronic timbres, producing a sonic environment that feels both extended and claustrophobic—akin to traversing a corridor without a visible end.

This design choice intensifies the player's sense of urgency. The soundtrack simultaneously suggests endless continuation while pressing the player toward completion. The effect becomes especially pronounced in the Big Crunch sequence, where downward-moving harmonies and a steadily accelerating tempo regulate the game's rhythm. Here, the music not only conveys the cosmological metaphor of collapse but also manages pacing, guiding the player's progression through an otherwise abstract representation of cyclical contraction.

8 The Stone, the Note, and the Climb

To conclude, I return to the Notepad section in Touch. This scene is designed as a notepad obscured by dense pencil shading, through which players must click and drag the mouse to uncover three concealed notes. "Our mountain needs no peak, only the courage to embrace the climb that never ends. What a beautiful stone. I hear the whistle, but can't tell if it's departing or docking. Calling it docking feels arbitrary, since I don't even know if it's a train on water or a ship on land. My carbon has been sintered in supernovae and stellar alchemy across thirteen billion dawns, just to refract this starlit codex through these temporary eyes."

The three notes revealed beneath the shading condense the central ideas explored throughout the game: reflections on life, perception, and the meaning of existence. Their language evokes the Sisyphean journey, the ambiguity of beginnings and endings, and the cosmological processes that frame human temporality. As Rovelli writes, "The world is not a collection of things, it is a collection of events. We understand the world by studying change, not by studying things. We describe the world as it happens, not as it is." *Rovelli (2019)*

Taken together, the scene underscores the impossibility of attaining certainty about higher dimensions or ultimate meaning. Yet it is precisely this insignificance that grants freedom: the freedom to exist, to perceive, and to experience life as it unfolds.

If it were possible to return to June 25, 1998—the launch day of Windows 98—I would still celebrate the beginning of a new era, just as one continues to celebrate the arrival of each new year. To mark these moments is to acknowledge the persistence of hope: a wish for a future, for renewal, and for the courage to embrace another climb.

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