

Absurdism as Autism: Exploring how the limited interactivity of walking simulators can be used to capture the experience of living with Autism



A thesis submitted for the degree of
BA (Hons) Game Design and Production

by

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Declaration

Candidate's declarations:

I, Hannah Bellamy, hereby certify that this dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of BA (Hons) Game Design and Production, Abertay University, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This work has not been submitted for any other qualification at any other academic institution.

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Date 03/05/2025

1. Abstract

The aim of this project was to create an absurdist walking simulator showcasing the personal struggle of living with autism through experimenting with interactivity.

To do so, a literature review was conducted to form a basis of what Absurdism is, breaking it down to its practical application within media and its philosophical meanings through Albert Camus' work – these findings were then applied to my personal experiences of living with Autism, linking the two concepts. A literature review on walking simulators was then conducted to form a design basis, exploring different games and how they use interactivity within the genre – all of these provided a framework for the game to be created.

The framework provides a solid base for the creation of a walking simulator telling a personal story of living with Autism through an Absurdist lens.

The final project provides an interesting exploration of such, yet it is evident that more technical programming skills are required to fully realise the Absurdist framing.

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2. Introduction

Every person lives their life differently; everyone has a different combination of nature and nurture that impacts their growth as a person – culminating in a unique perspective on the world. Art is often used as an attempt to showcase these different perspectives; films, books, theatre, tv shows that play out people's experiences for an audience to consume. Video games offer the audience a unique experience to *interact through* other people's experiences. There are affordances in the format that aren't (commonly) capable in the previously mentioned art forms.

This project is an exploration into how video games can be used to tell personal stories, how the unique element of digital interactivity can be capitalised on in order to showcase one such perspective on the world: my personal perspective. Being a neurodivergent individual, my perspective on the world is fundamentally different to a neurotypical – in a way that oftentimes makes no sense, to me nor them. The Absurdist movement explores the nonsensical in a way that reflects my navigation of the world – therefore I will be using it as a vehicle to show such

In culmination, my aim is **to create an absurdist walking simulator showcasing the personal struggle of living with autism through experimenting with interactivity.**

This topic has not been widely explored; there is little research into how the format of a video game can be exploited to tell personal stories – thereby justifying this project. It is also important to research into how marginalised stories can be told, due to the perceived lack of understanding from the wider population – and oftentimes unwillingness to listen. The format of a video game can be used to bridge the gap and allow people to better understand each other in an engaging format.

This topic will be explored through the research question:

Through an absurdist framing, how can the limited interactivity of walking simulators be used to capture the experience of living with Autism?

This will be broken down into three components:

- A literature review on Absurdism and walking simulators as a medium
- Personal lived experience with Autism and how they relate to the absurd

Which will provide a framework for creating my game as an answer to the research question through practice-based research.

The game is a 3D first person walking simulator that plays out as a “day in the life”. The player will start at the beginning of the day, they will have to walk to school, whereupon the character will have the realisation that they wish to leave the city and return to their family home. The player will navigate to the train station where a cutscene will play out, before the player is transported back into the open world which they can explore until the game ends after a short monologue.

A postmortem will be done of the game to evaluate how successful it was in adhering to the aim and research question.

3. Literature Review

Research Question:

Through an absurdist framing, how can the limited interactivity of walking simulators be used to capture the lived experience of being autistic?

1. The Absurd, from literary to visual

Absurdism as a philosophical construct came into solid fruition after the emerging militant state of the world; World War One, World War Two, the rise of nuclear arms, as well as the “expanding view of the universe through space exploration”. These changing times left thinkers concluding that “everything does not make sense” (Allen, 2023). Existentialism was seen as the nihilistic response to the meaninglessness of life (Roberts and Lamont, 2014), Albert Camus argued against this outlook; he viewed Absurdism as the opposite – life affirming in its meaninglessness (Raskin, 2001). In his book, *The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays*, Camus argues how it is man’s pursuit of living in a meaningless world that defines Absurdity. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Camus and O’Brien, 1955). Absurdism will be used as a framing due to how living with Autism can often leave one feeling that life is meaningless, it makes no sense – yet Camus’ solution to find meaning in the pursuit of living provides an optimistic answer to dealing with the neurological condition. This will be broken down exactly how in later sections.

When it comes to the evolution of Absurd art, it has roots going back all the way to Greek plays that have been defined under the label of ‘tragicomedy’, a genre that elicits a response of both laughing and crying (Bennett, 2015). This genre has been attributed to having the same sentiment as Absurdism in its definition (Belaid and Sari, 2025). *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is a more recent example of a tragicomedy that has also been attributed to as Absurdist (Juntunen, 2015), Dr. Arun Kumar Singh breaks down the reasoning behind it being an Absurdist play:

- There is no “traditional plot or coherent story”
- The characters “are strange or extraordinary”
- “There is nothing of conflict and action in the play”
- “The atmosphere prevailing in the play is neither one of comedy nor one of tragedy, but that of strange futility of endless or hopeless wait”
- “The speeches or dialogues of the play have been rendered in a highly repetitive, unconventional and broken form” (Singh, 2025).

These qualities are similar to what has been accounted for the primary factors of the *Theatre of the Absurd*; to quote Esslin’s 1960 book:

“It is impossible to identify oneself with characters one does not understand or whose motives remain a closed book, and so the distance between the public and the happenings on the stage can be maintained. Emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention. For while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence. Thus, the absurd and fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition” ” (Esslin, 1960)

This quote provides a strong link between the Autistic experience and Absurdism, in application to my project: the audience becomes the player, enacting firsthand the life of an Autistic person – they move throughout the world the same as the player, yet how they experience the world will seem irrational in its differences. Further expanding from this quote, we can gather an understanding as to what is attributed to the Absurd within a visual medium. It is important to look towards Absurd theatre due to how it established the core tenants of Absurdism within media, thereby providing valuable insights into how this can then be converted into the video game format. It is to be noted that another proponent of Absurdity is the authenticity of its messaging, as stated by Samuel Becket – author of *Waiting for Godot* on his play being adapted to the medium of cinema: “my play wasn’t written for this box. My play was written for *small* men locked in a *big* space. Here you’re all too big for the place.” (Knowlson, 2014).

Adapting the Absurd to another medium provides challenges of translating its theatrical affordances, and how the audience receives it. One scholar classifies a type of Absurdist film as “capturing absurdist metaphysical tensions and exploring ways of coping with these tensions...in these collisions, individuals strive to find answers where there are none, and thus the universe’s silence throws them back on themselves, compelling them to find their own answers to make their own choices” (Tubaly, 2024). This can be the characters within the story dealing with the Absurd, or the audience: *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) is one such film that captures both. The main character Caden struggles with the act of creating art in the meaninglessness of life, attempting to find answers in the act - “The absurd is achieved here by denying the viewers the catharsis. Our emotions remain unresolved, we have to look for the point ourselves” (Puzankov, 2021) This parallels my own project in how it will explore the struggle of creating art – Camus’ understanding of the Absurd as the meaning found in living life will be the answer to this struggle, whether this is realised or not may remain vague due to my own struggle with accepting the concept: this is a denial of catharsis which still reinforces the Absurd framing. The practical techniques of Absurdism and the philosophical messaging are both present within this film, it’s critical reception upon release confirms Samuel Beckett’s quote on the negatives of translating Absurd ideas into mainstream, big project, Hollywood theatrical releases. One review called the film “obnoxious drivel” and “pretentious”, (Reed, 2008). This is not to take away from the

film's success, its reception has been polarising, yet it stands as critically acclaimed almost two decades since its release with a score of 7.5/10 on IMBD (IMBd, 2008).

In summary, this literature review reveals two parts to Absurdism that are relevant to my project:

Philosophical absurd:

- Finding meaning in the meaninglessness of life
- Sense of futility, endless waiting
- Denial catharsis

This comes in the form of the messaging of my game, how it is presented and what the 'answer' is at the end – what the player should take away, and leaving room for the conclusion to be open to their own interpretation.

Practical absurd:

- No coherent story
- Strange characters with strange speech/dialogue
- Unrelatable, but related to real life

This relates to the design of my game; how the story will be curated and what mechanics will be in place.

2. Walking Simulators as a medium to tell stories

The form of a walking simulator was chosen due to how it places the player directly into the position of the character – they must move and navigate the world as that character, experiencing everything in a different way. The character will react to the world differently than the player might, forcing the player to attempt to understand this different perspective.

A walking simulator is a “Genre of video games focused on exploration and storytelling rather than traditional gameplay mechanics, emphasizing narrative immersion and environmental storytelling” (Waszkiewicz, 2026). The genre has been likened to Romantic art due to its focus on “walking as an aesthetic practice” (Carbo-Mascarell, 2016), further solidifying its distinction within video game genres. The game *Dear Esther* (2012) and the following expansion, *Dear Esther: Landmark Edition* (2017) are seen as the games that shaped the meaning and classification of the walking simulator (Montembeault, 2019), responses to the first *Dear Esther* (2012) was mixed; with a postmortem of the game stating “the need to consider Dear Esther as requiring a different attitude to a game system” when talking about audience responses (Pinchbeck, 2008a). This showcases the experimental nature of the genre which has been approached in many different ways;

- Breaking the narrative using meta in *The Stanley Parable* (2013),

- Pushing the format of storytelling in *The Beginners Guide* (2015),
- Translating museum exhibits to a digital format in *Kid A Mnesia Exhibit* (2021),
- *Quantic Dreams* creating games as cinema in *Heavy Rain* (2010) and refining it through subsequent creations like *Detroit: Become Human* (2018),

All of these walking simulators employ different techniques to tell stories.

The creator of *The Stanley Parable*, Davey Wreden, stated that “the best parts of the game are the parts that the player arrives at themselves” when questioned on “whether TSP is in fact a game at all” due to its limited controls (Hamilton, 2011); there’s the standard movement, a crouch button, a situational jump button, and an interact button (*The Stanley Parable Wiki*, n.d.). The meat of the game is in its choice-based narrative; the player can choose which path they want to take, with each different path resulting in different branching environments, with a narrator commentating the whole way.

Interactivity is presented through the form of choosing where to walk, the story is told through the environment and accompanying narration. Meta comes into play with how the game is a conversation on “if anything like a real ‘choice’ can exist” (Fest, 2024). Navigating the world as an Autistic person is relevant to this conversation; it can often feel like you have no choice in the way you act due to having to follow the invisible social contracts that exist, the format of a game comes with inherent rules within its design – providing the perfect vehicle for showcasing this concept.

The Beginners Guide (2015) is similar in presentation – in part due to it also being created by Davey Wreden. The story is told through narration and the different environments the player walks through; there is little to do in terms of interaction – it is a linear walking simulator. Yet it pushes the boundaries of how stories are told in videogames through presenting itself as a walkthrough of a real (in the games lore, not real life) developer’s games, exploring the subsequent struggles the developer had with creating them – as well as handling the audiences’ reception to them. As the game goes on it unravels into meta as the true story reveals itself to be of the narrator’s obsession with the developer – this intricate story is told solely through walking through the developer’s games and listening to the narrator’s commentary. Within the games themselves, gameplay mechanics are used in interesting ways to get across the developer’s messaging – in one minigame the player has to walk up a set of stairs, yet as they progress the player movement speed gets slower and slower; in another the player has to sit in a prison cell for hours before they are released and can continue. In both of these instances, the narrator gives the player an out, letting them press a button to regain their normal walking speed, and by opening the prison door after explaining how long the player would have to wait, thereby negating the meaning behind these design choices from the developer, leaving the audience open to interpret why the narrator is showcasing these games to the player – yet is robbing them of authentically

experiencing them as the developer intended. This disconnect between what is being told to the player, and what they are experiencing can be seen as Absurd – the autobiographical format lends itself to such an aesthetic due to the nature of interpretation. As such this can be applied to my own project, having a narration that explains the experience of creating the game and what it entails attempts to bridge the gap between the player and the character they are playing as. Meta is inherently Absurd; the player is experiencing a game in one way – yet the game denies the player of this experience.

Kid A Mnesia Exhibit (2021) appropriates a museum exhibit into a video game format, utilising the affordances of the digital environment to fully take advantage of the space that wouldn't be possible in a physical setting to the same degree. The exhibit is a reassembling of the Radiohead music recordings 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' "reformed in a series of impossible or possible spaces populated by equally impossible or possible creatures (Epic Games Store, 2021). The player walks through the spaces in any order they wish – contained spaces in a maze-like map, the emphasis on the stories told through the music. There is no interactivity aside from walking through the spaces and experiencing the environment. The latter half of my game will be curated as an exhibit with no interactivity; music and sound will be important to guiding the players emotional journey through the place – as shown by the game discussed. This also further justifies the use of a walking simulator, no interactivity is used in the *Kid A Mnesia Exhibit* (2021) yet a poignant emotional experience is created because of this. The player just has to exist within the space, much how they will be existing in the shoes of an Autistic person in my game, an observer through which they can explore the experience of.

Quantic Dreams are a company known for their 'interactive storytelling' games, most notably here; *Heavy Rain*, and *Detroit: Become Human*. These are relevant to the discussion in how they bridge the gap between cinema and games, allowing for an avenue to incorporate the theatre of the absurd teaching into my game. (store.steampowered.com, n.d.). Utilising Waszkiewicz definition of a walking simulator, both of these games fit. The player takes on the role of multiple characters, and essentially walks through a story that all the characters are connected in. Interactivity is present in a more gamified capacity that can be best described as interactive cinema, in *Heavy Rain*; heavily relying on quick time events as the main player input as well as the environment exploration (Heayes, 2025), in *Detroit: Become Human* the story takes on a branching paths approach with player decisions to go to certain places, make certain dialogue choices, take certain actions, providing the interactivity to directly influence how the story plays out. David Cage, the founder of Quantic Dreams (Quantic Dream, 2018), wants to create games as cinema – experimenting to create a whole new genre taking the core principles of the walking simulator and merging it closer to an interactive

cinema experience. This goes in hand with the notion that “games embodied new ways of telling and making stories that merged images and words with many other elements and repositioned players as readers and writers, interpreters, and creators” (Beavis, 2014). Within my game, I wish to create a similar merging of formats – by incorporating elements of film in order to break up the strictly gameplay segments.

3. Autism as Absurdism

Autism is a neurological condition that exists upon a spectrum, meaning no two people with autism will have the condition affect them in the same way (NHS, 2022). Due to this nature, I will be focusing on my own personal experience of living with the condition; as such this section will take an anecdotal tone. As a disclaimer: my experience with Autism has been largely negative, this will be represented in my writing and project output – this is not to discredit any people who view their autism in a positive light and are able to function normally through life as many people with Autism can (cite this), nor is this intended to perpetuate the demonisation of the condition. It is simply my own singular experience, exacerbated through the snapshot in time I will be representing through the game.

The way Autism affects me can be put into three categories:

- Sensory Issues
- Social Issues
- Emotional/Functioning Issues

All of which, present themselves in a way that relates to Absurdism.

For sensory issues, the [sparsely] known condition of misophonia can be best used to describe how noises affect me. Auditory noises created by the nose or mouth such as sniffing, chewing, and loud breathing, sound like the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard. This causes great discomfort for me; my attention is inadvertently focused on the noise, anticipating when it will next come, my heartrate rises, I break out in a sweat, it becomes impossible to stay still - yet when I am sitting in a room of people persistently emitting these noises driving me closer and closer the edge of a meltdown, I look around – nobody else notices it. How is it that I am the only one affected by such noises? This situation is an Absurd one, I am in the same position as the protagonist in films such as *Mother!* (2017), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Beau is Afraid* (2023) - we are all caught in a nonsensical situation that everyone around views as completely normal. The world functions in a way that deems such actions as normal, yet to me it is anything but – I exist in a world that is Absurd, yet only to me as a result of how my autism affects me.

Social issues is a main characteristic of Autism, it is the first criteria on the DSM-5 diagnosis (National Autistic Society, 2026). It can, for me, be best described as a lack of understanding of how society works. There are secret social rules that a person is expected to understand and adhere to, but there are exceptions to those rules sometimes – but it is all dependent on situation and context. It often feels like everyone else has a guidebook on how to socially engage. Many a time I have found myself in a social situation where I have been accosted for not following a rule I didn't know existed, that I am expected to intuitively know – it is my Autism that prohibits me from understanding these rules; when I can speak, what intonation to take, what facial expression I should put on, what hand gestures and body language I should enact. It is an elaborate play where I am the only person without a script. The way the world functions is Absurd to me.

Emotional/Functional issues are a self-perpetuating cycle, I find myself unable to function due to feeling emotions overwhelmingly that leads to a meltdown, the meltdown leads to an inability to function properly until the straw that broke the camel's back comes along and sends me into a meltdown again. There are other aspects to this more related to functioning issues, where simple concepts are not so simple for me. For example, what can be best described as being similar to contamination OCD; I have an inability to consume or let anything that has been deemed as 'contaminated' near my mouth. If anything contaminated touches my mouth; I have to go and scrub my face, brush my teeth, wash my hands or I will be sent into a meltdown. For something to be deemed as contaminated, it could simply look off, or it could have touched any surface or utensil that I haven't sterilised. This is absurd. It is nonsensical that I have to go through such lengths to eat food, lest I be sent into a panic – being able to be so easily sent into a meltdown is just as such absurd. I have little understanding of my own emotions, therefore cannot predict when I am at my limit.

All of these issues relate to the practical application of Absurdism with the nonsensical and strangeness of how I perceive the way the world is in relation to me. The philosophical aspect of Absurdism comes in my response to navigating this world, which is ever changing. At the start of this process, I was of the nihilistic philosophy; life is meaningless (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018), so what is the point? Yet upon researching into Absurdism, and more specifically Albert Camus' essay on the *Myth of Sisyphus*, I came upon the realisation that I myself could see myself as Sisyphus, working towards an impossible goal of normalcy against the boulder that is my Autism. I have always viewed my boulder as a burden I am forever trying to overcome, yet there is no overcoming my own innate nature. Camus reframes the struggle as the meaning in life, and this pursuit as being fulfilling in and of itself. Living

with Autism is a struggle, but it is not going to change – therefore I must find meaning and fulfilment because of this, rather than trying to escape it.

4. A framework for an Absurd Walking Simulator about being Autistic

The discussions from the previous sections can now be compiled into three pillars that form the basis of my game; Absurd design, interactivity, and lived experience.

1. Absurd Design

There are two parts to Absurd design:

Practical Absurdity

This is informed from the exploration of Absurd media, from which was deduced that the core pillars most relevant to game design are:

- Dialogue

Characters will talk in a strange cadence with broken sentence structure and almost indecipherable meaning

- Story

The story will be lacking a traditional plot structure, the player character will be difficult to emotionally identify with (for most neurotypicals), the meaning at the end of the game will be up to the player to interpret as no solid answer will be provided.

Philosophical Absurdity

The meaning of the game will be formed by Albert Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, taking most inspiration from the quote “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” This will be used to inform the design decisions that lead to the climax of the game, and it’s subsequent ending.

2. Interactivity

This pillar pulls together what little interaction can be used – and how it can be used to most effectively tell a story.

- Meta can be used to influence player decisions on how they interact with the game.
- The format of the game, how it is presented to the player affects their understanding of their place within the game – and how they interpret the overall meaning.

- Overall aesthetics can be used, changing environments through not only visuals but sounds depending on where the player chooses to go, giving them a different emotional experience with each changing location.
- Adding interactivity to the format of a film through the use of cutscenes can be used to elicit emotional responses through engaging the player more closely with the player character as it allows for more meaning to be put independent of the players actions as the player character.

3. Lived Experience

The lived experience section is informed by my experiences living with Autism, focusing on my experience at university: each section of the game will highlight how my sensory, social, and emotional/functioning issues were exacerbated and triggered through this time of my life.

4. The Game

Narratives are more engaging through being easier recalled when the story is “an integrated aspect of the overall system”, envisioning the story as a “network of objects, with a degree of predeterminism in terms of relationships which tend to yield interpretation within a predetermined range” (Pinchbeck, 2008) The pillars will all inform design decisions that contribute to telling the story.

The absurdist framing is informed by my research into the philosophical roots of the absurd and its media presentations, this is then applied to my lived experiences with Autism; the similarities between the two that provide the framing. The limited interactivity comes in the form of focusing on aesthetics and cutscenes to tell the story – rather than gameplay mechanics, as these forms have been used most effectively in walking simulators to showcase characters' stories.

4. Method

From the start of development, I knew I would be creating a walking simulator that explored my personal struggles living with autism; my first point of action was to list out and categorise the different ways in which my autism affects me and my day to day life. Towards the start of development, I had just finished watching *Twin Peaks* (1990) - the show is extremely Absurdist in its presentation (Loacker and Peters, 2015) and I found myself connecting to this aspect, relating to the uncanny dialogue and the way in which the characters react, or don't react to the strange events. It all felt very similar as to how I see the world. As such I started researching more into Absurdism, and found that the movement connects very strongly to my worldview – resulting in my choice of utilising the aesthetic to frame my project. Previously discussed is a literature review into Absurdism which identified two ways in which it relates to my project:

- The Philosophical Absurd, which came from my research into Albert Camus' works from which I established the messaging of my work.
- The Practical Absurd, which came from my exploration into other Absurd media and literature on the topic that set the foundation for gameplay elements and mechanics within my work.

I also discussed a variety of walking simulators in order to broaden my understanding of the genre, allowing for me to create design decisions that draw from the different applications of form and mechanics within the genre.

Finally, I discussed my lived experiences with Autism, categorising them into the social, sensory, and emotional aspects – from which I described how each of them could be viewed as Absurd, reflecting my outlook on the world.

I culminated all of these into a framework from which I used to create my game.

When it came to designing my game, I at first wanted it to consist of a three act structure with an intermission before the penultimate act, mirroring the traditional theatre structure:

- The first act would consist of separate 'minigames' that would enact an experience of my Autism; a 2d dress up game reminiscent of 2000's flash fashion games where the character won't accept any of the outfit choices, a sensory nightmare sequence of trying to pay attention to a class in school, a physics based cooking minigame where if the food touches any surface other than the pot or plate it is deemed 'contaminated'. Between each minigame, the player would be progressively transported along an open desolate city where they have a goal in the distance they must walk to whilst speaking to people that they can't understand along the way.
- The second act would be an animated music video representing the transitional stage of trying to accept living with Autism.

- The intermission would break down the entire game in a meta museum piece explaining the design.
- Ultimately, the final act, act three would end on a black screen with a prompt for the player to type in their answer: what do you want to happen in your life?

This scope was significantly high, so I broke it down into three distinct sections:

1. Bedroom

The player would enter from a diary entry styled main menu and be placed in a bedroom where they can interact with the wardrobe. This would open up the dress up game mentioned above; the player would choose three outfits, each one being rejected, before the character chooses a very plain one and ejects the player from the minigame. This was meant to represent the functioning issues; how overwhelming choice is, how many different factors come into play upon something as simple as choosing what to wear. After this, the player would walk into the kitchen where they were able to start another minigame, this one being the cooking minigame mentioned above – which would represent the OCD tendencies that oftentimes comes with Autism.

2. Open world

The player would leave the flat and be greeted with an open world where they would be prompted to head to school. Upon reaching the school they would enter the third minigame, this would place them inside a sensory nightmare – being forced to try and pay attention to what is happening in class whilst everything is torturously distracting them. Once this minigame finished, the player would be guided towards the train station, where they would view a cutscene.

3. Museum

The third section would consist of the player walking through the city back to the flat, where the world has changed into a greybox-museum. This would consist of commentary on the game, and on Autism. Upon reaching the flat, the player would be greeted with the text prompt.

At this point I was ready to move onto practical development, with the majority of the design being completed. I set up a trello to keep track of dates, and to break down tasks. I created level plans and used these to make the levels within Unreal Engine 5. I started with the flat, then moved on to creating the open world. It took two attempts to get the scale right. After the second attempt succeeded, I went back to program the first minigame. This was beyond my capabilities, so I instead created the third minigame and started playtesting this as a singular experience. I went back to the open world after this, adding in all the buildings and a lot of environmental decorations whilst playtesting it. I tried to program more things like opening doors and spawning the player in the same place they left – but these also did not work so I left them out. I changed the cutscene from fully animated, to half animated, half cutscene for the sake of time. When

packaging the game at the end, I ran into critical errors of the lecture hall level breaking the game, as well as the trigger boxes that cause the text around the world to appear – due to time constraints and a lack of knowledge on how to fix this, I had to get rid of them.

5. Postmortem

1. Game Overview

The game is a 3D first person open world walking simulator made in Unreal Engine 5. The game opens with the player standing in the player character's bedroom, out the window is a drawing of the scenery with a meteor coming down. The player can hear music coming from the other door in the flat, as well as banging coming from the flat above. Inner thought text appears around the room, describing the player character's annoyance with the situation. The player can walk out in the hall where the only open door is the kitchen, upon walking inside they are greeted with more inner thought text that appears describing the player characters conflict over whether their food is okay or not – before they realise they're going to be late for school. The player can walk out of the kitchen and into the dark coloured door which transports them outside.

Once outside the player has an overview of the open world, they can see the town ahead of them and the school to the right. The player walks down the stairs, revealing inner thought text along surfaces – that appears throughout the open world. The player can walk wherever, with the goal being towards the school. Once at the school they are prompted to go to the train station, this leads them through the centre of the town. Upon arriving at the train station, the screen goes black and the player views a cutscene that is a mix of live action and animation. After which, they are transported back into the world, yet it is fragmented, the closer the player gets back to the flat – the worse the world gets. All the while a monologue plays over the top, after it ends – the game closes.

This final outcome was not the intended product. This can be seen most notably in the name for the game: *The Final Act*. During playtesting, I was asked a few times why the game was called that. My reasoning was that originally the game was supposed to have more structured 'acts' - and the last level was meant to showcase how I am closing out this part of my life, finishing University and moving on into adulthood. It also had a dual meaning in how living with Autism oftentimes makes me feel like I am an actor, constantly putting on a facade of 'normalcy' - the final level was supposed to deconstruct this thinking and show how I will accept my autism as part of who I am. This personal progression did not happen, and it felt inauthentic to lie and claim that my thought process had changed – thus the final act of the game is a lot less profound than I intended it to be.

2 Capturing the lived experience of being Autistic through the Absurd

The design of the game does capture the lived experience of being Autistic through the Absurd, unfortunately due to technical programming restraints – the final product struggles to do so.

The inner monologue text serves to tell the player what the character is thinking. At the start of the game this could be seen as Absurd, particularly in the kitchen – it does not make much sense as to why the character is panicking so much over something as simple as a warm room. The text in the kitchen is a replacement for the cooking minigame, it represents the functioning issues around food and contamination OCD. Playtesting revealed that the thought process was an interesting insight into someone else's mind – regardless of whether they could empathise with the character or not. The exaggerated noises could also be seen as Absurd, they are an extrapolation as to what everyday sounds come across as to someone with sensory processing issues – therefore effectively showcasing a sensory issue through its Absurd exaggeration.

Having an open world was a design decision that I justified through what it begs; an open world allows the player to explore wherever they please, it represents freedom. Yet the character is on a specific journey, there are certain points they must travel to in order to progress the emotional arc – the player agency is a facade. This relates to the lack of agency I feel through my lived experience with Autism, as a human I have freedom – yet my Autism severely limits my ability to realise this. The open world lends itself to Absurdism in its design, the player can choose to explore and wander around the world – yet there is little there, leaving the player feeling a “futility of endless or hopeless wait” (Singh, 2025) as they search for something to happen, linking directly back to a previously discovered tenant of Absurdist theatre. The player must stick to the walking simulator format in order to progress, they must follow the predetermined path.

The open world largely looks normal, aside from the giant red meteor in the sky from which a burning sound is emanating. This represents the feeling of being outside, it feels like something extremely bad is about to happen – the literal presentation of this lends itself to the Absurd. In playtesting, players would understand this meaning upon seeing the characters thoughts when seeing how the first NPC doesn't seem to understand there is a meteor about to crash on them.

The text in the open world was meant to all be hidden, until the player walks into respective trigger boxes that would make them appear and disappear after the player walks far enough away. Unfortunately, my trigger boxes broke during packaging, and all

had to be removed, the text blueprints had to be replaced with just static text that was permanently in the world. This made it difficult to guide the player, hence a lot of readjusting needed to be done between playtesting sessions to see where the text could most efficiently be placed where it wasn't cluttering the game space but was still guiding the player in the right direction.

The lecture hall 'minigame' was the only one I managed to fully implement in engine, unfortunately it had to be cut at the last minute from the final product due to how it was somehow breaking the entire game and stopping it from packaging. The minigames were meant to represent perceived agency: their format is unique to video games in how they require interactivity. They were meant to serve as a break from the more open yet less interactive walking, their structure begged the player to make choices yet ultimately ended up locking the player out from having any of such – reflecting how Autism oftentimes feels like I am railroaded into choices that are predetermined for me.

This significantly dampers capturing the sensory issues aspect of my Autism due to how I was only able to replace it with inner monologue text around the open world that described, rather than showed how this affects me. I placed text detailing how the player must hold their breath when walking past a bin; a compulsion I have developed due to being afraid of catching germs – an Absurd thought in its irrationality, yet it is how the contamination part of the sensory aspect has affected me. The same happens in the cafe, where the player can see through the window that the character would not eat anything from there due to it not being covered, it is contaminated, it is an Absurd irrational thought. The cafe is a place which the player is barred entry from, once again denying the player agency in exploration – reflecting how my Autism denies me that same agency in the world. This showcases a social issue, I find immense struggle in entering an unknown place, or a place with other people in it due to a fear of being perceived and having to interact with others; in part due to negative experiences around socialising. Yet it is still an Absurd action to take, little can go wrong from simply entering a place, especially something that seems as simple as a cafe where you only have to place an order.

The time restraints around creating the cutscene led to having to take a different creative vision and design – changing the second half to low frame animation, inspiration was taken from the last episode of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* ('Sincerely Yours', 1997) where the titular character is undergoing an ego death, and the animation changes accordingly to increasingly broken down simple drawings. The effect that the change from real life video to 2d drawn animation was more effective than if the entire cutscene was in live action due to it better encapsulating the message according to play testers – they noticed and had interpretations for the switch to animation. The decision

to stylise the animation in a very unrefined way and keep it messy did well to showcase the regression one can undergo when returning to their childhood home. The way my Autism affects me makes me particularly susceptible to this regression.

The final part of the game is designed to look as if the game is breaking back down to its greybox state – the materials slowly revert back to the default, alongside the landscape the further the player gets to the flat. The meteor is a lot closer to the ground and the flames are louder. It was planned for this level to be the optimistic answer to living with Autism, one must find meaning in the struggle as per Albert Camus' philosophy. When I read *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1995) it felt like everything clicked into place, I must accept that I have Autism and this is the way my life will always be – I must imagine myself happy, finding meaning in the struggle. The final level would take on this tone, breaking down the game from its facade of reality back into its first design state where it would showcase how I came to this realisation. This did not happen. It was quite far into the semester when I had 'solved' the problems from the open world level, the game was not panning out how I had planned. The stress only exacerbated all of the triggers that are part of my Autism, it became increasingly harder to accept that this was what I had to accept as intrinsically part of my human experience. Instead of the level delving into my acceptance of the Absurdist philosophy, I decided to record a freeform monologue – an evolution of the text from the open world. In which I voice my internal battle, and my conclusion as of the end of my project to how I personally struggle living with Autism. I debated whether or not to keep this in, or re-record it with less emotion and more structure, less pauses and a more even tone. But I remembered the quote from Samuel Beckett, and how I established authenticity as a core proponent of Absurdism from it. It would be going against my own interpretation of the philosophy to change the monologue in any way. So, it stayed. The player is at last given agency, true agency. They can explore the world, they may be inclined to go towards the areas devoid of texture – but they will find nothing of note there. They will not find anything of note in the level, just the raging sound of the meteor and its imminent crash stuck in a freeze frame – and the voice of the creator. They will be forced to listen to this for eight minutes, upon which the players last choice will be robbed from them. The game will forcibly close.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim was achieved. An Absurdist walking simulator showcasing the personal struggle of living with autism through experimenting with interactivity was created. The design of which was a lot more successful in showcasing the lived experience due to its additional interactivity through minigames, yet the lack of minigames in the final product leaves it struggling to showcase the lived experience in

an engaging way. The lack of interactive dialogue in the game also diminishes the Absurdist framing and ability to showcase the personal struggle of living with autism due to how strongly it would have explored the social aspect of such. The literature review provided success in answering the research question; through an absurdist framing, how can the limited interactivity of walking simulators be used to capture the experience of living with autism? The framework created as an answer to this question provided the pillars needed to develop a successful design. This project may not have turned out as planned; the resulting game is lacking in a strong Absurdist framing – yet it strongly succeeds in showcasing a personal struggle of living with autism through experimenting with interactivity. In terms of research the framework created will provide a useful tool for future development.

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