# UNPACKING UNPACKING

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*"That's the whole meaning of life, isn't it? Trying to find a place for your stuff."*

- George Carlin

## INTRODUCTION – COZINESS AND (DIS)COMFORT

*Unpacking* (Witch Beam 2019) tells the story of a queer woman of colour named Sadie* as she moves to different homes and the possessions she carries with her along the way. The story is broken up into eight levels, each serving as a snapshot (diegetically, a literal photo in an album) of Sadie's life, centered on her unpacking and storing her belongings. Gameplay consists of removing objects

* None of *Unpacking*'s characters are named, but a Reddit user found that certain in-game objects are associated with specific names in the game's code, from which it seems the player-character is named Sadie (aecolley 2023). This label likely served to streamline the development process and the lack of any narrative reference to "Sadie" suggests that Witch Beam did not intend for this information to infiltrate gameplay. Despite this, I have opted to use the name "Sadie" throughout this piece because it is more convenient than repeatedly using the term player-character or protagonist, but I don't want to lose sight of the fact that no character in *Unpacking* is actually named.

from boxes and dragging and dropping them into place throughout Sadie's new living space. A level is considered complete once all boxes are emptied and all items are placed in a valid location.

The first time that I played *Unpacking* was while serving as a judge for an independent game festival's annual awards show. It was 2022 and I had just finished my PhD in California and moved back to Canada where I was living with my then-fiancée, now-wife and her family. This marked the seventh time that I had moved house, and it would soon be followed by an eighth when my partner and I moved to Sweden so that I could accept a one-year teaching contract. Coincidentally, I had lived in as many places as Sadie would over the game's story—I was no stranger to unpacking.

I was also pretty familiar with the game *Unpacking*. My dissertation had an entire chapter devoted to so-called "cozy games," among which *Unpacking* was often held up as a prime example. Responding to the idea that such designs had become especially popular because of the many anxieties of the moment (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020), I had interrogated the politics of coziness. I concluded* that cozy games often uphold rather than confront systemic inequities; they produce *comfort* (the desire to *keep things as they are*) instead of advocating for change. Even so, I felt that their emphasis on collectivity and care made them too important to dismiss wholesale. Despite some wariness, then, I was eager to play *Unpacking*, to enjoy it as I had heard others had.

As the credits rolled hours later, I was feeling *something* quite strongly. My role as a juror had been to focus on the game's story, which I had mixed feelings about for reasons that will become clear. But even I had to concede that telling a person's life story through the objects that enter and depart her life as she moves from place to place was clever and effective. The moment-to-moment gameplay was satisfying too, with everything from the colourful art style to the crisp sound effects for every object being laid in its proper place coalescing

* See Scully-Blaker (2024). Though I use the term "wholesome game" there, I see that as functionally synonymous with "cozy game." Bódi (2024) has similar critiques of coziness.

to scratch an aesthetic itch that not every game can reach. Despite knowing that I would recommend *Unpacking* for our shortlist and recognizing that it was an above-average game, though, my prevailing feeling was *discomfort*.

What follows is my making sense of the response I had to playing Unpacking, a cozy game whose themes and mechanics clashed with my own experiences accruing possessions and moving house. Alongside my life circumstances, a core aspect of unpacking my time with *Unpacking* is reckoning with its status as a cozy game. My prior experiences with moving did not make me relish this apparently relaxing design, they made *Unpacking*'s tone feel contrived, even naïve. Yet the aspects of the game that I *did* enjoy compel me to delve deeper into my own player response (Fullerton and Farber 2025) and interrogate how *Unpacking* reckons with its material attachments.

I have opted to organize my thoughts around several of the game's levels. For each section, I'll begin by setting the scene, then bring in elements of my own life alongside observational notes from a second playthrough that I completed in preparation for writing this. I will also introduce salient pieces of theory where appropriate, though I see these less as building blocks towards supporting a traditional thesis and more as ideas that I have encountered and internalized, as much a part of my lived experience as any other memory. My hope is that these ruminations will build upon themselves much like the levels telling Sadie's life story: a photo album culminating in a bigger picture.

## 1997 – "FINALLY MY OWN ROOM!"

*Unpacking*'s first level takes place in Sadie's childhood bedroom. Most levels involve placing items in multiple rooms, but here the player starts off small, emptying several cardboard boxes and orienting the contents around a bed, a desk, a shelf, and a cabinet. Items like a soccer trophy and art supplies tell us a bit about who Sadie is while others like a Polaroid camera, a *Tamagotchi*, and Hasbro's electronic *Simon Says* game seem intended to remind players that it's the 1990's. I hid Sadie's pink diary with a heart shaped lock under her pillow, but when I tried to place one of her stuffies on the chair that sits in front of her desk, the game refused, highlighting the object in red until I moved it somewhere else (I chose the top of the cabinet). I had learned an unspoken rule: only certain object placements are acceptable.

Shortly after my real-world 1997, my family moved house for the first time in my life, from one end of town to the other so that I could attend what my parents saw as a better school. My parents had sold their home, intending to rent for a year and then find something more permanent in this new neighbourhood. They could not have known that they were on the cusp of the Canadian property bubble, a steady rise in the cost of housing that has continued largely unabated to this day. My parents entered the housing market only to be priced out of it immediately. I remember the bedrooms I had in both homes. I had a loft bed not all that different from Sadie's, but I hated drawing things and I was never allowed a *Tamagotchi* because my mom didn't like that they could "die."

One of the first notes I wrote for this level was "This isn't me," and I meant that in multiple ways. I think here of Brie Code (2016) calling games "boring" to problematize the overabundance of predominantly white, male designers making games for an imagined white, male audience. Looking around this young girl's bedroom suggests, in this sense at least, that *Unpacking* is not a boring game. In later levels when Sadie becomes an adult, the differences between her gendered experiences and mine become more profound than just her choice of toy or the posters on her wall, but there is already an elephant in this first room. Anything I have to say about *Unpacking* is grounded in my own experiences which fundamentally differ from Sadie's life (or those of *Unpacking*'s Creative Director, Wren Brier). These boundaries can be

drawn along axes of privilege and oppression (race, gender, class) but also manifest in other ways.

It's perhaps an insignificant observation compared to more systemic issues, but I want to return to *Simon Says*. First released in 1978, I've never held one of Hasbro's black discs with four colourful buttons. Both its release year and most popular media I have consumed always suggested to me that this was an iconically "80's" toy, rather than something you'd find in a 90's bedroom. With my above notes on lived experience in mind, I would not be surprised to learn that many children of the 90's had a *Simon* Says, just as others had parents less concerned by the mortality of the *Tamagotchi*. Anachronistic or not, though, Sadie's *Simon Says* toy gained particular significance to me as a conspicuous nod to nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym calls nostalgia "fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present" and which "have a direct impact on the future" (2001 p. xvi). One reading of this (which I see as central to understanding cozy games) is that the anxiety-ridden present drives us towards anything that reminds us of the apparently easier years gone by. During the COVID-19 pandemic many people (myself included) flocked to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) to experience a facsimile of the daily activities and social interactions that were prevented by lockdown regulations. The game allowed people to access something they no longer had, during these "unprecedented times" it offered a version of the precedented. Per Boym, however, if such reverie is too distracting and the anxieties of the present are left unchecked, this impacts the future. Whether due to ecological collapse, the rise of fascism, wealth disparity, or another existential threat, many people now report feeling nostalgic for the COVID-19 lockdown itself.*

Games produce and leverage nostalgia all the time, but in the case of cozy games, the reason for doing so is generally to cultivate intimacy, to make players feel at home† in the game world. This isn't inherently a problem, but it becomes one when the vast majority of these games offer players an escape from present anxieties without

* See Auguste (2024) or Burton (2024), for example.

† Doubly so since nostalgia stems from the Greek *nóstos* (homecoming) and *álgos* (pain).

acknowledging the systemic issues that cause these anxieties to begin with. Whether cozy game designers intend it or not, the act of inviting players to withdraw themselves from their material, political present necessarily implicates cozy games in the arena of material, political struggle, even if their contributions to that struggle are to produce *comfort* with the status quo and the political *stasis* that comfort brings. If one is comfortable with "how things are," then they are less likely to rock the boat.

*Unpacking*'s first level sets the stage for what's to come. Few spaces seem as likely to produce feelings of nostalgia and intimacy than a childhood bedroom, yet from the hidden limits on object placement to the evocation of a nostalgia that isn't mine, this foray into Sadie's 1997 also produced distance. In a way, this is healthy. I certainly don't think that *Unpacking* should have been an empathy game,* for example. My suspicion of coziness contributed to my uneasiness, but it doesn't tell the whole story. The distance and discomfort that began here only became more pronounced once Sadie had grown old enough to leave home and then crestfallen enough to return.

## 2012 – "THIS ROOM USED TO FEEL BIGGER"

I'm jumping to *Unpacking*'s fifth of eight levels, though some of what happens before this point bears discussion too. In the typical three-act plot structure, this level marks a halfway point, the narrative low.

* For good criticisms of this, see Yang (2017) and Polansky (2019).

Sadie has moved back to her childhood bedroom after a bad breakup. The space is littered with objects that were left behind from Sadie's childhood and her out-of-placeness is communicated mechanically through the difficulty of fitting an adult's belongings into a child's bedroom. After unboxing a photo of Sadie and her ex (I can tell it's him because there's a pushpin through his head), the game chides me for trying to put it up on her corkboard. I gather that Sadie wants to hold on to the lessons learned from this relationship but would prefer not to have a visual reminder of past events. Fair enough.

In levels two and three, Sadie moves away to college, first living by herself and then with two roommates. I know it's two roommates because there are two other toothbrushes in the bathroom. I'm allowed to put Sadie's toothbrush in a mug that already holds another one, a gesture so intimate that I'm surprised when the game allows it. This has a fantastic payoff in level four when Sadie moves in with her boyfriend (named Eric in the code). Eric's apartment is draped in greys and blacks to an almost neurotic degree, and the space is clearly laid out to make the player feel unwelcome. In the bathroom, I discover that Eric's toothbrush is a stale, grey electric model with its own stand, meaning that it can't share a mug with mine even if I wanted to. His fecklessness barely phases me by the time I'm moving the toilet paper out from below the sink to make room for Sadie's pads. In the bedroom, Eric has spread his few socks and underwear across too many drawers, so I have to consolidate them myself. Not seeing any obvious wall space, I put Sadie's diploma under the bed as a joke, but the game okays it.

I only moved away for my PhD in 2017, but by 2012 I had lived at three different addresses. Like Sadie, my childhood belongings could all fit into one room, but once I was old enough to pack and lift boxes myself, I developed an appreciation for how little it takes to feel like you have a lot. In daily life, one usually only brings home a few objects at a time, so finding a place to put them isn't too hard. I remember that even larger objects that felt like tectonic shifts in the layout of my room —a goldfish tank, a TV my dad found on the curb—would always settle into place within a week or so, like they had always been there. But when you move, everything has to go—to the next house, to that

same curb—all at once. It's heavy, it's time-consuming, and it's expensive.

As one review of the game deftly observes, Sadie "has exactly as many pairs of underwear as fit the drawer, and she doesn't lug around any awkward presents or empty cardboard boxes she needs to keep for the next move or until an item's warranty expires" (Hetfeld 2021). *Unpacking* shows us Sadie's belongings, but not her junk. Every object has a purpose, whether practical or sentimental, and most of them have a predetermined place. When a box is fully unpacked, it is literally sucked up into a magical void, removed from the scene. We don't have to follow Sadie to her second or third Ikea trip in as many days to pick up the correct lightbulb. In my notes for level five, I express surprise that post-breakup Sadie thought to hang on to so many of her books since these are some of the heaviest and most expensive objects to ship.

When I moved off campus in 2020, it was because of the pandemic instead of a breakup. When lockdowns first began, a few universities got some very bad press for forcefully evicting their students from campus residences. Not wanting to repeat this gaffe but still very much wanting us to leave, my university "strongly encouraged" anyone living in residence to return to their homes, wherever they may be. After much uncertainty and several flights back and forth, I relocated fully to Canada, having left my furniture and many books and boardgames behind. I had to be careful about who I told since it was unclear whether all arms of the university were ultimately okay with this. *Unpacking* avoids overtly stating where Sadie lives,* but many people are entwined in the bureaucracy and violence of borders, often more severely than I was. While the heartbroken return to Sadie's old bedroom resonates on an emotional level, then, the game's coziness cannot account for the *logistics* of moving or the spell would be broken. But what a spell it is.

Up to this fifth level, the soundtrack has been upbeat, even peachy,

* There are some clues, like a Silver Fern flag suggesting proximity to New Zealand and a view from Eric's apartment featuring a bridge from Brisbane, Australia (where Witch Beam is based). My point is that the story's setting (and any logistics it would imply) is left unimportant to the plot.

but the track that accompanies Sadie's rock-bottom is so dour that it's almost too on the nose. In my playthroughs, however, it felt earned. I appreciate its depiction of some of life's wrinkles, even as the cozy vibes demand that the game gloss over the logistics and bureaucracy of moving house. From a narrative standpoint, I was struck by this portion of the game on both playthroughs. The conversion of interpersonal relationships into the ease or difficulty of "finding space" for oneself in a new home is clever, the sort of thing I wish I'd thought of even though I don't design games myself. Like many narrative lows, however, Sadie's story is followed by upward turn, one that breaks the spell and brings my post-game discomfort into focus.

## 2018 – "WE'RE SO LOOKING FORWARD TO MEETING YOU!"

I now want to turn to the eighth and final level of *Unpacking* but doing so again requires that we mention the levels that I've skipped. Following Sadie's breakup, the upbeat music has returned, and level six sees her moving into her own apartment. It's a bit rough around the edges—my notes observe that the living room uses beanbag chairs for seating despite Sadie now taking medication for back pain—but in contrast to earlier living arrangements, it feels much more "hers." Sadie herself apparently agrees as, once a new romantic partner arrives on the scene (her name in the code is Mali), level seven is devoted to moving her into Sadie's space instead of the other way around. Mali is more than welcome to share Sadie's toothbrush mug, which inciden-

tally used to be a mug Sadie drank from, but it was cracked sometime around when Sadie met Eric (I get it). By 2018, the couple have found firmer footing and level eight involves moving into an honest-to-goodness house, complete with a nursery that's primed to welcome a new addition to their family.

One aspect of Sadie's life that becomes more explicit in these levels is her aspiring art career. There are hints of her talent in scattered throughout her earlier homes, but the apartment from levels six and seven is the first to have a dedicated office space. Here, the walls are adorned with concept sketches of anthropomorphic animals, which are finally joined in chapter eight by multiple copies of a bound and published children's book. While my reading of the narrative suggests that these levels feel "easier" than Eric's apartment as a reflection of Sadie and Mali's more fulfilling relationship, my notes observe that these levels are also just larger, with the final home in particular having two floors, nine rooms, and a garage that we don't get to see.

I'm reminded of an observation I've seen in a few different places about the animated sitcom, *The Simpsons*. First syndicated in 1989, the show centers the titular Simpson family who were written as a typical lower-middle class family by 1980's standards. However, the series has persisted for 37 seasons (and counting), and as such, the idea of a family of five living in a two-story house with two cars, two pets, and only one (semi-)stable source of income has become increasingly unbelievable.* The premise that this fictional family was struggling to make ends meet couldn't keep up with real-world inflation, and that has altered the sorts of stories that the show can tell.

*Unpacking*, meanwhile, has no time for inflation. That's simply not what the game is about, nor is it a particularly cozy topic of conversation. Maybe Sadie's parents help her pay her rent while she's getting back on her feet, and maybe she and Mali are working overtime to pay off their mortgage. In my notes, I observed that Sadie has kept the same few t-shirts in her closet for years and that she took a lava lamp

* *The Simpsons* famously lampooned this phenomenon as early as 1997 in the episode, "Homer's Enemy" through a character named Frank "Grimey" Grimes, whose shock at the family's lifestyle is repeatedly lampshaded to comedic effect.

from her parents' house, but only after leaving home the second time. Are these clues that she's tightened her budget, or just a way of keeping continuity between levels? Sadie's book deal seems to be the obvious catalyst for her and Mali to go from apartment to house, but even typing that out feels cold and mercenary, like I can't let these fictional characters feel happy without wondering who's footing the bill.

My partner and I haven't found a "forever home" yet. One reason for this is my chosen line of work: academic contracts aren't always based where one would like them to be, and we've spent years living abroad while I keep trying to secure a permanent position somewhere close to our aging parents. Another, no-less significant reason for our growing list of "for now" homes is that owning property in a major Canadian city is almost impossible. The same housing market that left my parents behind in the 90's has now outpaced what many people can afford, such that Ricardo Tranjan (2024) has articulated the "tenant class" as a united category of people disenfranchised by a fundamentally exploitative system. Though many in Canada speak of a housing "crisis," Tranjan refuses the implication that the state of the market is exceptional, arguing that it's indicative of a system working precisely as intended. I don't begrudge Sadie and Mali owning a home, but I'm conditioned to wonder how they afford it. I think of all the time my wife and I have spent packing, unpacking, emailing landlords, requesting repairs, booking flights, buying belongings, tossing others, and struggling to dispel the pervasive idea that we need a stable home for our lives to begin.

For as long as people have been writing about games, there are those who have called them escapist power fantasies. Some of these commentators have helpfully noted the frequency of narratives and mechanics rooted in white, heteropatriarchal notions of conquest and mastery (Fron et al. 2007). In this light, cozy games are understandably held up as "a powerful and necessary subversion of current culture," their emphasis on collectivity and care producing experiences that mainstream games seldom care to (Short et al. 2017). However, this doesn't prevent cozy games from relying on power fantasies all their own, notably ones of "stability and safety" (Waszkiewicz and Bakun

2020, p. 228). The erasure of money is a common fantasy in cozy games,* but I have shown that Witch Beam's moving simulator omits far more. For *Unpacking* to work as a designed cozy experience, the logistical and material aspects of life under capitalism must be glossed over as much as possible and this absence made the game ring hollow, made me feel like it was lying.

Revisiting and remixing an earlier point: this *is* me. My response to *Unpacking* frustrates me because I wanted to enjoy it. I don't want my relationship to moving to be fight-or-flight, to default to the realm of logistics, but that's where my experiences have led me. The rule-based system that shapes *Unpacking* and the larger systems that exacerbate the inequities of our material reality are too close for comfort. Yet, this is only *me*. There are many other accounts of players being profoundly moved by the story of a queer woman of colour finding love and stability which one reviewer called "beautifully uncomplicated," and I want to hold space for that too (Chloe R 2024).† There is value in a narrative that temporarily removes players from certain familiar violences, just as there is value in questioning what makes such a reprieve possible. What's most important to me, however, is what coziness inspires us to do next.

## CONCLUSION – RIPPING OFF THE BAND-AID

Of all Sadie's possessions across the eight levels of *Unpacking*, few feel as significant as her stuffed pig. To my knowledge, it's the only item to appear in every level, and it is also the only item that noticeably changes as the years go by. At the beginning of *Unpacking*, the stuffie is a vibrant pink with a magenta ribbon around its neck. Sadie brings the plush with her to college, and when I tried to stow it in her closet

* See Scully-Blaker (Forthcoming)

† I also want to hold space for how the gulf in my and Chloe's experiences tacitly refuses the pervasive idea that games reliably enact arguments through processes, as if designers are the ultimate arbiter of meaning in a virtual world. *Unpacking* hasn't "made" us feel a particular way (Isbister 2016), it has prompted us both to reflect on our play experience and how it relates to other aspects of our lives (Fullerton 2019; Fullerton and Farber 2025).

(imagining that she might want to keep it hidden, even if she also wanted it close by), the game refused. Slightly faded and lacking its ribbon, the pig found a home on her bed. By the time Sadie moves in with Eric and then back to her childhood home, the pig, too, has seen better days. It now has a rip in its belly, complete with protruding fluff (I get it). Moving into her own apartment, Sadie is able to repair the stuffie, patching over its wounded fabric (again, I get it), and Mali introduces a stuffed tiger to the space that becomes the pig's stalwart companion. By the final level, Sadie and Mali have washed the pig and given it a new ribbon. It seems they intend to pass it on to their newborn.

It's true that cozy games subvert some of mainstream gaming's oldest formulas, calcified tropes that are well-worth destabilizing. But more often than not, they do so by hailing the same system of values that enshrined those tropes to begin with. Sadie's story is one of neoliberal, capitalist success. She faced challenges but overcame them and was rewarded for her efforts: she owns her own home and has started a family. The game is cozy in part because of that ending, one that is legible as "happy" because Saide has reached milestones that our socioeconomic system has conditioned us to see as aspirational. *Unpacking* is not so crass as to imply that the secret to Sadie's success was moving into an apartment with a dedicated office space to fill with concept sketches for her book, but it doesn't close off this or similarly materialistic readings either.

This is the problem with many cozy games: their aesthetic and affective registers aim for a "break" from the status quo, but their politics fail to break from anything. I'm reminded of Mark Fisher's *capitalist realism* the pervasive sense that "not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative" (2009, p. 2). I'd argue that *Unpacking*'s unwillingness to critique our attachment to objects or to interrogate the costs of renting or owning a home stem from something like this. It is easier to imagine a cozy game about moving than it is to imagine one that articulates alternatives to the status quo, but that doesn't mean that people shouldn't try.

Like Sadie's stuffed pig, the damage that neoliberal capitalism

inflicts on our collective wellbeing is only being patched over by cozy games. These titles can cover up the damage and perhaps protect existing wounds from opening further, but they fail to consider where the tear came from or how long it will be until another tear forms. To embrace coziness as a relaxing, unproblematic aesthetic without any reflection on *why* such escapes feel more necessary is a band-aid solution. It is to refuse to see the current system for what it is, a political non-move that we can no longer afford to be making.

For Fisher, a key part of dismantling capitalism is to *de-naturalize* it, to remind ourselves that it is human made, an arbitrary concept we have done without before and can do without again. Playing through *Unpacking* the second time made me yearn for a cozy game where players *do* face the materiality of moving house. The idea of making housing insecurity "cozy" is only uncomfortable if we accept that coziness is the same as sanitized and unproblematic. But collectivity and warmth can be found in many places that aren't so clean-cut, and I've seen that in some games,* but I'd like to see it in more.† Like any video game, the largest and most damaging systems of all were made by people and can be unmade or remade in turn. There's an earnest sort of coziness to that, but one I hope leads us to action instead of stasis.

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* *Citizen Sleeper* (Jump Over the Age 2022), *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers Studio 2023), and *Arctic Eggs* (The Water Museum 2024) come to mind, among others.

† An anecdote worth sharing: as I was finishing this piece, I came across *Unpacking*'s "Dark Star" ending. Whenever one completes a level by putting all objects in a valid spot, a gold star appears in the bottom right of the screen which can be clicked to move on to the next level. If, however, the payer places everything in the wrong place, then a black star appears instead. One can apparently complete every level this way and experience a sardonic twist to the story (albeit one that still doesn't push past comfort). Other forms of coziness are possible!

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