

Screen Currency 2026

Understanding the value of
Australian screen and games

A study in 5 reports with
supporting case studies

Case study

Unpacking

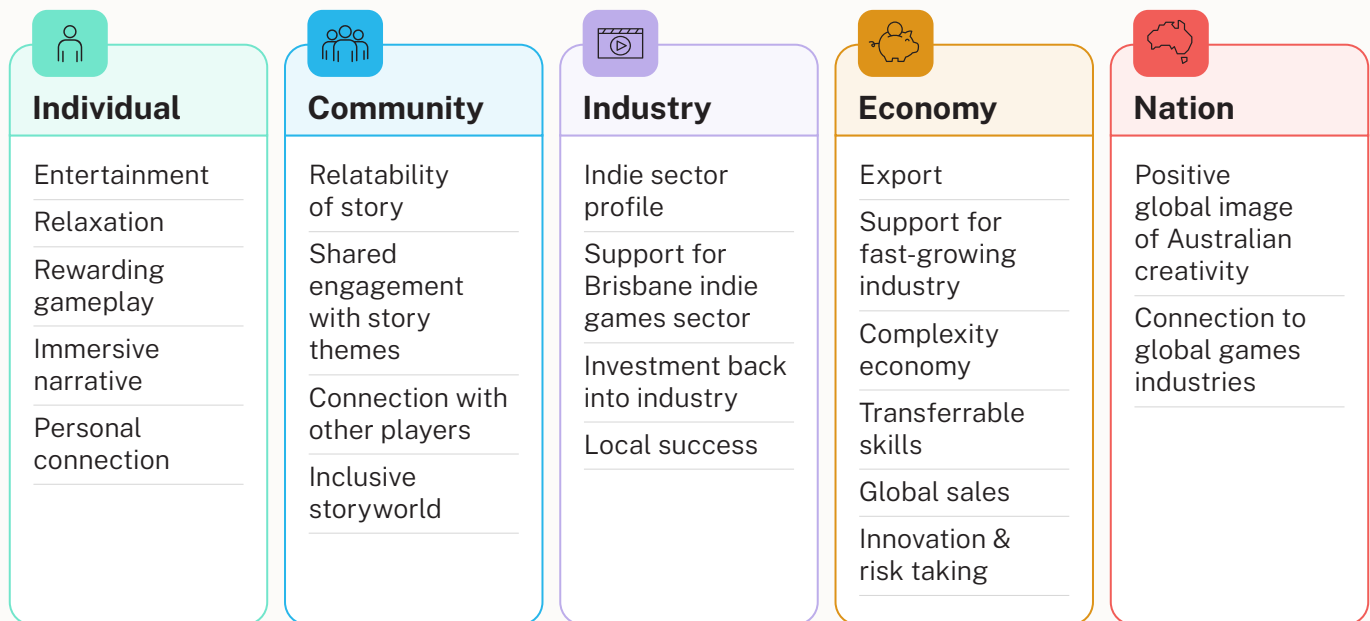
Video Game • Released 2021
Witch Beam



Australian Government



Introduction



Unpacking is a puzzle game that combines the meditative act of unpacking and organising objects with experimental and immersive storytelling.¹

Developed by Brisbane independent studio Witch Beam and published by Humble Bundle in November 2021, the game invites players into various domestic settings to assist an unseen protagonist through several life transitions. By deciding where to place personal items – ranging from childhood mementos to kitchen appliances – players gradually piece together a complex narrative. This subtle approach allows a profound story to emerge through the character’s possessions, exploring themes of personal growth, relationship changes and the quest for independence. This innovative framework has been central to the game’s widespread critical acclaim.

The release of *Unpacking* has had unprecedented cultural and social impact, redefining how narratives are constructed through environmental cues. By subverting traditional “cozy game” tropes, *Unpacking* uses physical constraints and spatial limitations to mirror the protagonist’s emotional state, adding a layer of depth rarely seen in the genre. It holds substantial value for the games industry by championing authentic representation and inclusivity. Its success has helped codify the “environmental storytelling” movement, proving that experimental

formats can achieve global commercial success. Since its release, the game has sold over 1.2 million copies on Steam alone.² It additionally maintains a distinct sense of “Australian localism” through its subtle Brisbane-inspired art and architecture.

Unpacking has garnered prestigious awards including the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for Best Narrative and the public-voted EE Game of the Year. It challenged the industry’s definition of what constitutes a game narrative, inspiring a new wave of developers to focus on minimalist, object-oriented storytelling.

Beyond its technical influence, the game’s cultural legacy lies in its universal relatability. It tapped into a collective sense of vulnerability around the notion of “home”, solidifying its place as a landmark title in the modern indie landscape. Audience responses show deep emotional resonance, particularly in navigating life’s transitions through our attachment to personal objects. Coupled with a highly polished creative execution and an award-winning soundtrack, the game’s quality solidified Witch Beam’s reputation on the international stage.

Creation

Companies involved

Game studio:

Witch Beam

Witch Beam is a small Brisbane-based indie studio known for its polished, highly original game experiences for PC and console platforms. Witch Beam's first release was the critically acclaimed arcade-style action game *Assault Android Cactus*. The follow-up title was the very non-arcade style, non-action game *Unpacking*. Most recently, Witch Beam has released *Tempopo*, a puzzle game about rescuing musical flowers.³

Studio partners Tim Dawson, Sanatana Mishra and Jeff van Dyck first worked together at Sega Studios Australia. Dawson and Mishra eventually left their jobs to pursue independent game development. When they contacted van Dyck for advice on audio design, he ended up joining the team. After shipping *Assault Android Cactus*, Wren Brier joined as a long-term collaborator and the original creator of the team's second project *Unpacking*.

Origin story: the idea and initial development

Unpacking was inspired by real-life unpacking, when creators Dawson and Brier moved in together.⁴ The two began prototyping the game in late February 2018. In May, it was selected for the Stugan game accelerator program, taking Brier and Dawson to Sweden for 2 months, where they created a playable demo of the game. A week after the end of the accelerator program, an animated GIF of the game from the official *Unpacking* Twitter account went viral, achieving over 10,000 likes and attracting 6,000 new followers in 48 hours. Since then, *Unpacking* has been presented at the Freeplay Festival's Parallels showcase, Day of the Devs, GDC's Mild Rumpus, BitSummit 7 Spirits, the PAX AUS Indie Showcase among other industry events.⁵

The creative process

Witch Beam's creative process for *Unpacking* was centred on maintaining a small collaborative studio and prioritising creativity over growth. Instead of scaling up, the studio decided to remain small and aimed to empower its partners and contractors.⁶

In an interview with Mishra, he said, "*Unpacking* was Tim and Wren [Brier]'s idea at the core. Wren was a full partner in that project and owner of everything to do with it ... and then we hired [contractors]. At our peak, there were maybe 6 people working on the game."⁷

Rather than treating the protagonist's sexuality as a superficial characteristic, the development team grounded every aspect of *Unpacking*'s design in a deep understanding of the character's identity and lived experience. Brier said, "I write what I want to see more of in the world."⁸

Creating the game was interwoven with creative and technical skills to effectively reflect the characters on a deeper level. Mishra reflects "The way they approached the technical aspects of writing the story... you have to really understand a person to reflect them in just their objects."

“We thought it was a very interesting and high-quality game, and we'd put all this care and attention into it.”⁹

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Location

The game design is based on Brisbane, where the developers live, and features cultural references such as house features unique to Queensland and Brisbane's Story Bridge.



“The way in which they approached the technical aspects of writing the story, developing the characters and everything about them to understand it, so that they could then design the things that reflected them with. You have to really understand a person to reflect them in just their objects.”¹⁰

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Production

Game studio employment metrics

The table below is adapted from *Unpacking*’s full game credits by consolidating individual roles and teams into broader categories to illustrate the broad spectrum of roles essential to developing a game such as *Unpacking*.¹¹

Developers:	2
Additional coding:	1
Additional art & animation:	6
Sound design & foley:	3
Development & business support:	1
External support:	66
People in multiple roles:	44

Production financing: investment and presales

Unpacking was primarily self-funded by Witch Beam with supplemental grant support from Screen Queensland and Screen Australia.¹² They used almost all the earnings from the success of their previous game.

- Government funding for *Unpacking* included:
- \$50,000 in development grant
 - \$5,000 travel grant for Game Developers Conference (GDC)
 - 2x \$1,500 travel grants for Games Connect Asia Pacific (GCAP), all from Screen Queensland.¹³
- Mishra acknowledged the important role government funding has played in the success of both Witch Beam and the Australian games industry, “We love the support from screen bodies and the tax offsets because they help us to continue to exist and take riskier bets. And then if our bets succeed, like they did with *Unpacking*, we think that rising tide kind of helps everyone else.”¹⁴



“We have decided to stay as a fairly small entity because we think creatively that’s what compels us. We’d rather be painting the pictures than hiring someone else to paint the pictures for us.”¹⁵

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Training and skills

Screen Queensland's funding helped the studio hire their first artist, and travel grants assisted them with showing the game at Melbourne Games Week and overseas, which in turn helped secure a publisher and connect with developers and members of the press.¹⁶

Witch Beam is also focused on creating opportunities for local developers to gain experience and contribute to other commercial game projects.

“We’re trying to keep the local industry going as strong as possible with people we’ve known for 10–15 years and some who we haven’t known quite as long ... At some point we’ll be working on [a game] and we’ll need someone to do some art or programming. If those people don’t exist in Brisbane or greater Australia, it hurts us just as much as it would anybody else.”¹⁷

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Economic impacts

Unpacking achieved significant commercial success, selling over 1 million copies in its first year, demonstrating the strong market demand for Australian-developed independent games and highlighting the sector's capacity to generate substantial economic value.¹⁸

Innovation

Unpacking takes an innovative approach to storytelling, allowing a complex but subtle story to emerge slowly through the possessions of an unknown protagonist as she moves through different stages of her life.

“They play it, and it’s actually a very soulful, emotional narrative experience”, said Mishra. “Over time you find your audience and people who are looking [for more of a] unique experience. This is a crafted game that’s not just all ‘content’.”¹⁹

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam.



“Australia has this innate benefit where people have the skill set and the knowledge and the expertise and the ability to try their hand at entrepreneurship ... a lot of it comes back to the fact that people can try. They can be like, this is what I’m going to dedicate my life to, and the fallbacks exist.”²⁰

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam



“We’ve actually been successful enough off the back of *Unpacking* that in the last few years we’ve started to put our own money back into supporting and funding other local games.”²¹

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam



Dissemination

Distribution

Unpacking is distributed through independent games publisher Humble Games via a wide range of platforms, including Steam (Windows/macOS/Linux), Nintendo eShop (Switch), Xbox Store (Xbox One), App Store (iOS), Google Play (Android) and, in 2022, became available on PlayStation Store (PS4/PS5)."^{22,23}

Release

Unpacking was released on 2 November 2021 to critical acclaim and commercial success, selling over 100,000 copies in its first 10 days.²⁴ The game launched simultaneously across multiple platforms, including PC via Valve's Steam service, Nintendo Switch and Xbox, where it was also made available through the Xbox Game Pass subscription service at release. This broad, multi-platform launch helped maximise accessibility and early reach.

In May 2022, *Unpacking* was subsequently released on PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5, further expanding its audience. Following the emergence of unauthorised mobile versions of the game, an official mobile version was released for iOS and Android in August 2023, ensuring players could access an authentic version of the experience on handheld devices.

Awards

The game was critically acclaimed and won a number of prestigious awards including an Australian Game Developer Awards (Game of the Year), an Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences D.I.C.E Award (Outstanding Achievement for an Independent Game), 2 Game Developers Choice Awards (Innovation and Best Audio) and 2 BAFTAs (Narrative and EE Game of the Year).²⁵

Renewal

Witch Beam has confirmed that no sequels or spin-offs are currently planned.



Engagement

Online metrics

Selected audience and critic scores are shown below.²⁶

Metacritic (score):	83/100
Metacritic (user):	7.4/10
IGN (rating):	8
IGN (user):	7.8
Steam (followers):	69,225
Steam (reviews):	40,040

Reception

Critical reviews were extremely positive. In the UK edition of The Guardian, Keith Stuart wrote, “This is a small game, but its meaning and intent are large. Like any domestic drama, it tells us as much about our own lives, tastes and experiences as it does about the characters we are bonding with. One thing is certain: learning about the relationships this protagonist has with her possessions, her lovers and her family, and how they affect her, is one of the most profound and touching experiences I’ve ever had playing a video game.”²⁷

And on GamesHub, Edmund Tran said, “*Unpacking* is a game that caused me to feel an incredible nostalgia about various periods of my own life, despite it having relatively little in common with the specifics of the game’s unseen protagonist or their overarching story. It cut right into my soul with a fine touch.”²⁸

Online and international engagement

Unpacking is popular online. On game streaming platform Twitch.tv, the game has reached peaks of 52,549 concurrent viewers and 143 concurrent channels streaming the game. In October 2025, nearly 4 years after its release, the game is still streamed for nearly 13,000 cumulative hours every week.²⁹

On Steam, the game received 36,926 user reviews between its release on 2 November 2021 and the date of data collection on 15 October 2025. Of these reviews, 93.2% were positive. Reviews were seen in 29 languages, speaking to the global reach and appeal of the game. The game’s ability to tell a personal and relatable story without words clearly contributed to its ability to travel and be appreciated by global audiences.³⁰

Pricing

A number of reviews, both positive and negative, critically discussed the game’s price (\$28.95), especially in light of the time required to complete the game. One reviewer says that while it is “otherwise a great game. Very relaxing. Wonderful music”, it was also “a little disappointing to be finished all the content in one little sitting.” A few pushed back on this narrative with reference to both the developers’ labour and how other forms of media and art are valued, “Many will scoff at the \$20 price tag, but I can see the love and devotion put in the game. Sound design and pixel design isn’t easy, even in this day and age. The developers put in a crazy amount of sound effects so that putting items in various areas spots makes a different sound. I would certainly hope the \$20 contributes to paying the developers, sound artists and graphic artists a good wage for their effort in this.” The discourse around the cost of the game speaks to the complex, challenging and rapidly evolving way players are navigating economic value in independent games.³¹



“*Unpacking* generated this kind of adoration where people really connect with it. They see themselves in it in a way that’s quite personal ... with *Unpacking*, you get a surprisingly large number of people who are like, oh, this is my life.”³²

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Social and cultural impacts

Key themes emerged in Screen Currency's online audience analysis of user-generated reviews, with many on the game's innovative approach to storytelling, its emotional and personal resonance, and the close attention to detail in its visuals and audio. Reviewers also highlighted the game's symbolic and social value, including its queer representation, its relatability to players' own life experiences, and its distinctly Australian setting. Together, these elements contributed to players' appreciation of *Unpacking* as more than an organising game, with many describing it as a thoughtful and emotionally resonant interactive story.³³

Entertainment value

Almost half (45%) of sampled comments on Steam said that *Unpacking* was entertaining, and 34% mentioned the game's aesthetics.³⁴

One reviewer noted that while "the presentation of *Unpacking*'s story is done in such a minimalist style, Witch Beam manage[d] to expertly convey a convincing sense of raw human emotion", and went so far as to say the game has "many themes that resonate with what it means to be human". Other reviewers called the game "delightful" and "a really interesting way to discover a story". The story of the main character growing up, making personal compromises with different partners, before finally finding happiness had a strong emotional resonance with players. One warned that they "think you may need a box of tissues – maybe. I certainly bawled my eyes out, maybe because it was in a way daunting at times thinking of actually being the person cramming yourself into someone else's tiny living space you now share ... and then moving on ... I cried hardest at the end, like a relieved, happy cry." And another said the "soft and sweet ending genuinely made me cry, and I will undoubtedly be booting this up in the future to find new ways to unpack the rooms and relax in the future."³⁵

The game resonates personally and emotionally despite an audiovisual style that at first looks deceptively simple but requires extensive care and attention. The isometric pixel-art style was highlighted by Steam user reviewers as "real calming", "stunning" and "like sinking into a memory foam mattress after spending a lifetime on a bed of iron."

Reviewers also highlighted the care and attention invested in the game's audio design. One reviewer shouts out the game's composer, Jeff van Dyck, by name for his award-winning work on the game, and connects his sound design work with the game's affective power: "it's not just the music of *Unpacking* that will delight your eardrums, there are minute details throughout to impress any audiophile. For example, picking up and placing every single item in the game is accompanied by a unique sound effect depending on the object and surface on which it is placed. There's a great degree of detail to the sound design – even to the point of hearing game discs rattle in their case when placed on a shelf, or the satisfying thud of a book laid face down. Environmental cues remind you that the game is taking place in subtropical Australia, with background chattering of Rainbow Lorikeets and whistling of Honey Eaters while leaves calmly rustle in the wind. So satisfying."³⁶

The detailed but retro audiovisual style, combined with the self-paced and open-ended playstyle of *Unpacking*, leads many players to describe it as "relaxing" or "zen". As one reviewer summarised, "Zen is exactly the perfect descriptor for this style of gameplay. There is no time limit, no pressure, and really very little element of stress or challenge. Players may proceed at their own pace, taking time to appreciate their surroundings, slotting each new item into their new home. This slow-paced gameplay becomes especially important when admiring the game's stunning visuals, which hold an impressive amount of detail and are full of clever references and nods to pop culture."³⁷



45% of sampled comments on Steam said that *Unpacking* was entertaining, and 34% mentioned the game's aesthetics.³⁸



"You would never know who is going to sit down and play *Unpacking*. They could be three years old or they could be 70 years old. The range is infinite for that game, which isn't always the case. Depending on what you make, you'll find a very specific audience will play the game. With *Unpacking*, it was everyone. That opens your eyes to the fact that you need to make sure that the design, the elements, the choices that you make can accommodate all of those types of players."

– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam³⁹

Social value

Just over a quarter (29%) of sampled comments on Steam mentioned the game's symbolic value.⁴⁰

One reviewer via Steam, explain how the game social value is reflected in the way players are positively influenced, "It's fun to stream and play while chatting with friends too! This games also made me clean my room, so if you have any mental illness that prevents that then try playing this game even for 5 minutes. Seriously."⁴¹

For others, the act of unpacking a house was not only calming but highly relatable, leading to a number of players reflecting on their own lives and experiences of moving. One particular reviewer, writing from Ukraine, reminisced about having "to leave Kyiv, but my apartment back there is still decorated for Christmas. Also, right before the war, my friend visited, and we rearranged my shelves to look better. It was such a healing experience. I don't know why but unpacking someone's happy life helps to keep myself sane. It is ... soothing. Comforting. Thank you."⁴²

Another reviewer reflected, "I've been there, girl" in their reaction to the moment in the story the lead character has to shove her diploma under her partner's bed because there's no room for it on the walls.

Queer representation

Central to *Unpacking*'s story is gender and sexuality, as the protagonist "grows up and discovers [herself]," as one reviewer put it. Some positive reviews simply stated "lesbians 🍷" in what seems to be a desire to support games with queer representation. While others called it "a very cute and gay little game". Another noted, "The queer representation was amazing and something I didn't expect to see."⁴³

 29% of sampled comments on Steam mentioned the game's symbolic value.⁴⁶

Storytelling

The dynamic between player-directed expression and the specific story Witch Beam wished to tell led to some tensions. For instance, players were often frustrated that they could not place items wherever they wanted and were constrained by the level's demands. These restrictions, however, are critical for the story, such as the moments the character has to make compromises in a share house or when moving into a partner's apartment. One player noted, "I love the concept, and most of the gameplay is reasonably enjoyable. What super ruined it for me though is how certain items need to be placed in very specific rooms or places in rooms ... As soon as I realised [this] and I wasn't really quite as free to place things how I wanted, the rest of the levels became a slog."⁴⁴

Some players also commented on this tension and later updated their own reviews after realising the game was an interactive story, rather than an open-ended puzzle game.

"The third time I played *Unpacking*, I approached it like a story rather than an organising or decorating game. I took stock of this little girl's bedroom and saw a burgeoning artist, steeped in nerdism, not dissimilar from me in '97 ... This time, I get it. *Unpacking* has nothing to do with making pretty rooms or feeling zen; it's a detail puzzle about fitting your life into new spaces as you age, making space for others, and what matters enough to hold onto. It's also a heart-warming story about an artsy girl with big dreams. I'm not a sentimental or keepsake-y person, and she'll need a professional to fix the ruin I made of her last closet, but I had a lot of feelings about her life. I've never been so proud of a fictional character for owning nice dishes."⁴⁵

This speaks to a broader tension faced by game developers as creators in an interactive medium. Video game players expect some degree of control and expressive power, but game developers are also trying to communicate and express specific ideas and stories. Here, *Unpacking*'s most innovative feature, its subtle storytelling, also becomes a barrier for some players expecting more power to craft their own stories.

 "The game is so non-judgmental and the method by which you play it, there's so many options, accessibility settings and different things."⁴⁷
– Sanatana Mishra, Director at Witch Beam

Australianness

Unpacking is set in Australia, with references throughout such as Brisbane's Story Bridge visible out the apartment window in one level. One review noted that "It felt like an Australian game" and was delighted to learn that it "... turns out it was made in Queensland!" A reviewer from Brisbane explained that "It's also a game deeply rooted in Brisbane, from the VJ boards of her childhood home, to the boyfriend's apartment in Kangaroo Point overlooking the Story Bridge, to the one-bed woolshed conversion in Newstead; so many little architectural and cultural touches root this game squarely in my own home town." Another reviewer commented, "When I realised this game was created and based in Brisbane (where I live), I fell in love with this game immediately. Seeing the Story Bridge, the weird honeycomb bars in the windows and other things that are associated with Australia where I am at the moment makes me smile every time I play this game."

When asked if the game was developed with an Australian audience in mind, Mishra responded, "Well, it's an Australian story so there's always the hope that people will recognise the Australian-ness of it that's indirectly there throughout the experience."⁴⁸

In total, 19 reviews mentioned either Australia, Brisbane, or Queensland. While this is a very small percentage of all reviewers, it speaks to how the game's art positioned itself as explicitly Australian to those who identified the markers, without necessarily alienating a larger global audience without that connection.⁴⁹

Endnotes

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