eludamos
Journal for Computer Game Culture
Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025)

eludamos.org

Unpacking an Obfuscated Female Protagonist

The Use of Mise-en-Scène in Minimalist Videogame Narrative Through Social Semiotics

Mienke Fouché

Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 2 (2025), pp. 139–159

Unpacking an Obfuscated Female Protagonist

The Use of Mise-en-Scène in Minimalist Videogame Narrative Through Social Semiotics

MIENKE FOUCHÉ

Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal of an obfuscated female protagonist in the minimalist videogame *Unpacking*, which narrates its story entirely through its mise-en-scène. Adopting a social semiotics approach, the study delves into how the socially constructed elements of the game's mise-en-scène assist players in '*unpacking*' the protagonist's identity and narrative. *Unpacking* introduces a novel approach to ludonarratology by intentionally omitting the direct presence of the protagonist, instead focusing on the spaces and objects that players interact with. As players progress through the protagonist's life, these spaces and objects become laden with social significance, creating a shared history between the player and the protagonist. The game diverges from traditional storytelling methods, offering an environment where the story is pieced together through the objects unpacked in each new space the protagonist inhabits. These objects serve as signifiers of her memories, aspirations, and life stages, evolving beyond mere gameplay elements into artefacts that shape her life story. A significant aspect of this paper is its discussion of the novel portrayal of a female protagonist who is omitted from visual representation. Rather than focusing on her physical appearance, the game emphasises unearthing her identity through gameplay, allowing players to discover who she is. The game exemplifies how minimalist narrative techniques, rooted in social semiotics, can foster rich and engaging storytelling experiences. By omitting a visible protagonist, *Unpacking* allows players to explore and interpret the narrative through the spaces and objects they encounter and the connections they establish between them. This article's significance lies in its examination of *Unpacking* as a case study for understanding how minimalist narrative techniques can effectively convey a complex and emotionally resonant story through unconventional means.

Keywords

Mise-en-scène; female protagonist; minimalism; social semiotics; ludonarratology

---

Eludamos Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025), pp. 139–159
https://doi.org/10.7557/ejcgc.v16i2.7824
Copyright © Mienke Fouché
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license

The significance of objects in storytelling extends beyond their physical presence; they act as vessels for meaning, shaped by our experiences and emotions. Gillespie (2014, p. 155) asserts that "objects don't speak our language, we must translate their meanings", highlighting the necessity of interpretation in understanding the deeper significance of everyday items. In videogames, objects can become powerful narrative tools, serving as extensions of a character's identity and history. While seemingly mundane, these inanimate objects are imbued with emotional weight, creating connections between the player and the protagonist through shared histories and experiences.

This paper examines the portrayal of an obfuscated female videogame protagonist uniquely narrated entirely through the games' mise-en-scène. *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) presents a novel approach to ludonarratology by intentionally omitting the protagonist from the game and rather relying on the player's interaction with the game environment. The various stages that the player plays through build a significant history between the player, the protagonist and the mise-en-scène.

The discussion begins with an overview of female and LGBTQI representation, considering how recent developments reflect broader cultural changes towards more authentic and nuanced portrayals. The discussion then shifts to the theoretical foundations of Tavinor (2009), Gillespie (2014), and Sofer (2013) to examine how *Unpacking* employs mise-en-scène and minimalist design to construct a narrative that unfolds through player interaction. Tavinor's concept of narratives of disclosure underpins the analysis of how players infer meaning through environmental storytelling rather than direct exposition. Gillespie's shared histories framework explores how recurring objects in *Unpacking* accumulate emotional significance over time, fostering a connection between the player and the protagonist. Sofer's dark matter concept highlights the role of absence and omission in shaping the game's narrative, demonstrating how missing or repurposed objects create a meaningful presence.

The framework for this analysis is grounded in social semiotics, which provide the tools to examine how videogames convey meaning through minimalist storytelling techniques. This reveals how minimalism and mise-en-scène are used effectively in videogames to create rich, immersive experiences that communicate complex ideas and emotions without relying on explicit dialogue or overt exposition.

While *Unpacking* is particularly relevant for exploring identity-driven narratives, the results of this paper extend beyond games with explicit identity themes. By highlighting the critical role of spatial and object-based storytelling, this paper contributes to a broader discussion on how minimalism in mise-en-scène enhances engagement, immersion, and narrative depth across a wide spectrum of videogames and is also of use to videogame academics as well as videogame developers.

Female protagonist representation in videogames

This section provides a brief overview of the challenges and developments in female and LGBTQ+ character representation in videogames. It addresses the historical context, the industry's response to criticism, and the ongoing issues with stereotypical depictions.

Videogames have historically faced criticism for harmful stereotypical representations, particularly of female characters (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Jansz & Martis, 2007). Over time, the videogame industry has responded to these criticisms, leading to some improvements in character representation (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Lynch et al., 2016; Engelbrecht, 2020). The 'Lara phenomenon' marked by the rise of competent female characters in leading roles, represents a significant shift in this trend (Jansz & Martis, 2007). However, despite the increase in such characters, many remain subject to sexualised depictions, catering primarily to male audiences (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Female characters continue to be underrepresented and are often portrayed more provocatively compared to their male counterparts (Beasly & Standley, 2009). However, MacCallum-Stewart (2014) argues that narrowing academic scrutiny of female protagonists only to their visual depictions diminishes the impact that these characters have on the industry.

Parallel to these developments, Utsch et al. (2017) observed an increase in LGBTQ+ character representation in videogames, with a greater diversity in identities emerging particularly after 2005. Süngü (2020) compared LGBTQI+ representation in AAA and indie games, finding that indie games developed by LGBTQI+ creators often provide more meaningful portrayals of LGBTQI+ experiences. While representations of female and LGBTQI+ characters in games has improved, these advancements are not consistent and often fluctuate based on the preferences of target audiences.

As mediated experiences (Jansz & Martis, 2007), videogames play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards gender roles (Beasly & Standley, 2009). As social artefacts, they influence cultural perceptions (Utsch et al., 2017), guiding interpretations of masculinity and femininity beyond mere biological distinctions (Beasly & Standley, 2009; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Bristot et al., 2019). Media interpretations contribute to the foundation of societal understanding (Munters, 2017), and the interactive nature of videogames amplifies these effects, despite their fictional contexts. However, the continued reliance on harmful stereotypes in character archetypes can perpetuate damaging constructs (Lynch et al., 2016). Research indicates that exposure to sexualised female characters in games is correlated with lower self-efficacy among female players and the reinforcement of negative attitudes towards women among both genders (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Media should evolve to reflect societal changes and promote cultural assimilation (Bristot et al., 2019), and game developers have the potential to challenge stereotypes by offering more constructive representations (Munters, 2017). Notably, Beasly and Standley (2009) found that 31% of sexualised female characters appeared in games rated suitable

for all ages, exposing young audiences to these problematic depictions. Given that strong female protagonists can enhance girls' appreciation of games (Jansz & Martis, 2007), empowering portrayals have the potential to boost female players' self-worth and reshape male players' expectations.

The industry has shown improvement in female character representation. Characters like Lara Croft have evolved for a new generation of gamers (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) and this is tied to broader trends in AAA game design towards more complex and nuanced female protagonists (Engelbrecht, 2020). However, this trend is sometimes superficially applied where female characters play important roles but, in some cases, are subjected to benevolent sexism (Perrault et al, 2016) or defined by male characters (Adhyaksana, 2019). Bristot et al. (2019) observe that some female characters lack physical diversity in terms of race and body shape. They argue that this lack of diversity is still a result of designing characters for the heterosexual male gaze rather than for the role of the character (Bristot et al., 2019; Sa et al., 2020). Sa et al. (2020) expands on this by stating that the character's physical depiction must serve a purpose in the narrative otherwise it undermines the character.

Unpacking exemplifies a novel approach to representing a female LGBTQI+ character by omitting her physical presence from the game entirely. Instead, the character is represented solely through the spaces she inhabits and the objects she takes with her, using mise-en-scène to convey the story of the protagonist's journey from childhood to parenthood.

Mise-en-scène in videogames and their use in narrative

This section offers an exploration of mise-en-scène and its role in narrative construction within videogames. The integration of theoretical perspectives from film, theatre, and videogame studies provides a rich framework for understanding how these elements contribute to immersive storytelling and the narrative potential of mise-en-scène in interactive media.

Deldjoo et al. (2016) describes mise-en-scène as the aesthetic features that collectively create a style within a performance medium. Many of these features may go unnoticed by the viewer, yet they significantly impact the overall experience. Mise-en-scène involves the deliberate use of space and objects to construct a performative setting that expresses mood, situates the narrative in a specific time and place, and aids in conveying the story. It can be understood as a medium of communication where the careful selection of elements adds layers of meaning that the viewer interprets. Spatial principles such as depth, proximity, size, and proportion, along with design elements and principles like line, shape, colour, texture, contrast, framing, and movement, all contribute to conveying physical, social, psychological, emotional, financial, and cultural significations.

Traditionally associated with film and theatre, mise-en-scène has also been applied to videogames with the added element of interactivity (Arsenopoulou et al., 2023; Ulas, 2014; Girina, 2013). In videogames, the space presented to the player is not merely an environment to observe but one to explore by physically moving the player character within it. Additionally, objects or props within the environment can be interacted with, often allowing players to rotate and zoom in to observe details. This interactivity immerses players more deeply by giving them a physical presence within the space. Game designers can leverage this to construct a narrative. For example, in *Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)*, an example of a mainstream game, a remote farmhouse scene presents animals in the yard, an empty, disordered house with blood on the floor, and a nearby bandit camp. It does not take much imagination to connect the dots between the bandit camp and the scene at the farmhouse, thereby constructing a narrative simply through exploration and observation.

Tavinor (2009) has criticised the quality of narratives in videogames, arguing that they often prioritise gameplay functionality and graphic polish over storytelling. In many cases, games treat narrative as secondary, which can lead to it being an afterthought. Tavinor (2009) also highlights the tension between gameplay and narrative, noting that while excessive narrative may interrupt gameplay, too much gameplay can detract from the narrative. Cutscenes, which are scripted narratives, often conflict with the interactive nature of games, as they remove control from the player, creating a disconnect between the player and the game (Tavinor, 2009). While cutscenes serve a narrative purpose, they can be detrimental to the overall experience by removing the player from the game world.

To reconcile narrative and gameplay, Tavinor (2009) proposes the creation of interactive narratives where the player is responsible for discovering the content of the narrative. He refers to this as "narratives of disclosure or discovery", where the player uncovers the story through their actions in the game. Toh (2019) also supports this reconciliation as crucial to the experience of the player. The narrative is scripted, but the player unearths it through exploration. Tavinor (2009, 125) argues that this method is effective because it is "artistically satisfying" and engages the player's fear, apprehension, curiosity, and wonder by allowing the player character an interactive role in the discovery process. Toh (2019) observes how the narrative and gameplay can semiotically be combined by establishing relationships and resonances between the two.

In this context, mise-en-scène effectively solves the tension between narrative and gameplay by using the in-game environment to provide narrative clues. This encourages the player to explore the world actively, without being placed in the passive state of watching a cutscene, thereby allowing the narrative to unfold through the player's effort. In this approach, the player may not alter the narrative's content but

unearth it through exploration. This method aligns with Tavinor's concept of interactive narratives that engage the player in the discovery process, enhancing immersion and narrative satisfaction.

Returning to performing arts discourse, Gillespie's (2014) concept of shared histories and Sofer's (2013) notion of dark matter add further depth to the narrative power of mise-en-scène. Gillespie observes that shared histories are created between objects, performers, and audiences throughout a production. Objects become socially charged through their use in performance, acting as agents within the narrative rather than merely being acted upon. Gillespie notes that these objects are "vessels of memory… uncannily blending memory with the theatrical present, reconstituting the past in the present moment" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 151). The reoccurrence of objects affirms their importance to the audience and the object's presence begins to carry weight throughout the progression of the narrative.

Similarly, Sofer's (2013) concept of dark matter describes the invisible elements that structure the audience's experience, creating a felt absence that invites speculation about unseen events. What is absent, implied, or unseen can be just as narratively and emotionally significant as what is visible. These invisible aspects pull the audience deeper into the theatricality and create an experience that transcends semiotic analysis (Worthen, 2014). This concept can be applied to mise-en-scène in videogames, where the absence of visible events or objects leaves a lingering presence, prompting players to piece together the unseen narrative. When coupled with the shared histories concept, the absence of object that carries significant historical weight, in terms of narrative progression, causes a significant and noteworthy presence due to the contrast.

Collectively, these concepts provide a robust understanding of how mise-en-scène can be employed in videogames to convey narrative. The player interacts with the environment to uncover the story (Tavinor), builds a shared history with objects throughout gameplay (Gillespie), and speculates on invisible events that shape the game world (Sofer). This interaction not only informs the narrative but also makes the experience more immersive and compelling, as the player's effort directly influences the extent of their engagement. This paper argues that *Unpacking* demonstrates a successful combination of these elements.

Social semiotics applied to videogames

Social semiotics explores the social dimensions of meaning-making through multiple modes of communication, including visual, verbal, written, gestural, and musical. In videogames, these modes converge to create rich, multi-modal experiences for players. De Oliveira Matumoto and Gonçalves-Segundo (2022) applied a social semiotic approach to analyse a 1996 two-dimensional action game, revealing that games

are more than mere 'toys'; they convey meanings beyond entertainment. The multi-modality of videogames allows for layers of meaning-making through various sensory channels.

Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017) connected social semiotics to procedural rhetoric in game studies, emphasising the signification potential of videogames. They argue that social semiotics contribute to videogame design by integrating narratological and ludological elements into both representation and interaction. Van Leeuwen (2005) highlights that social semiotics require semiotic resources to enable meaning-making. In videogames, the multi-modality offers a diverse range of these resources, each contributing uniquely to the player's experience.

Caroux et al. (2015) proposed a player-videogame interaction model that breaks down games into specific aspects, each of which can be considered a semiotic resource (refer to Fig 1). These aspects are not just components of gameplay but are instrumental in conveying specific meanings. The videogame aspects identify the concrete aspects of the game that the player engages with while the player aspects result in this engagement.

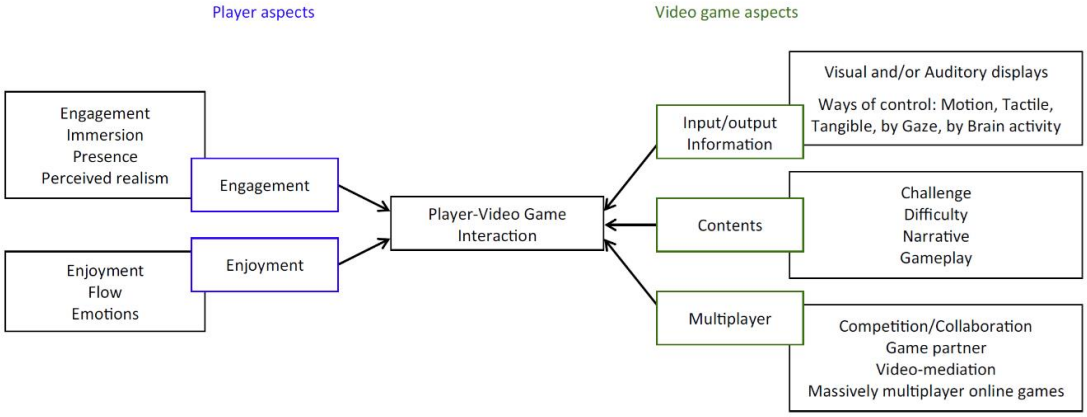

Figure 1. Caroux et al.'s (2015, 368) player-videogame interaction model.

While Caroux et al.'s model is not the only framework for analysing videogames, it focuses on player interaction as a vital component of games as social artefacts. In the context of social semiotics, the interaction between player and game is crucial for allowing players to construct their interpretations of the game's narrative.

Van Leeuwen (2005) also notes that social semiotics often work interdisciplinarily with other theories. This paper considers social semiotics in conjunction with minimalism, the style in which the game under discussion is created. Sofer's concept of dark matter is particularly relevant in minimalist game design, which 'structures and focuses' the game experience by eliminating excessive or unnecessary elements. Minimalism in videogames is often employed to explore specific themes through artistic and immersive means. These games are typically designed around a particular aspect—such as narrative, gameplay, visuals, or audio design—while reducing

the others (Naelen et al., 2011). Where Caroux et al.'s' model identifies semiotic resources that can be employed in conveying meaning to players, Naelen et al.s' (2011) minimalist design principles provide the aesthetic and stylistic constraints used to present the resources to the player. The methodology section demonstrates how the semiotic resources are shaped by the minimalist aesthetic in *Unpacking*.

Case study formulation

Unpacking (Witch Beam, 2021) is a minimalist story-rich indie game situated in the genre of cosy puzzle gaming released for multiple platforms. The game has won several awards, most notably: the 2021 Australian Game Developer Awards (game of the year, outstanding achievement for an independent game, excellence in accessibility), the 2022 25th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards (outstanding achievement for an independent game), the 2022 Game Developers Choice Awards (best audio, innovation award), the 2022 18th British Academy Game Awards (narrative, EE game of the year), and the 2022 IGDA Global Industry Game Awards (2D animation, 2D environmental art) (Steam, 2024).

This paper considers the novel approach towards ludonarratology by omitting the protagonist from the game and allowing the player the freedom to uncover the narrative through the gameplay. The game follows the life of the protagonist (referred to as P in this paper) through eight pivotal stages she relocates to. Players infer the narrative solely through the spaces P inhabits and the objects she unpacks. The following table summarises the game stages, the number of rooms and the number of objects that the player unpacks:

Stage	Number of rooms	Number of objects
Child bedroom May 1997	Bedroom	49
University dormitory January 2004	Bedroom, kitchen, bathroom	125
Commune March 2007	Bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, dining room, living room	166
Boyfriend's apartment September 2010	Bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, living room	147
Parents home June 2012	Bedroom, bathroom	67
P's house January 2013	Bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, dining room, living room, office	256
Girlfriend move-in November 2015	Bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, dining room, living room, office	120

Family home July 2018	Entry hall, guest bathroom, kitchen, dining room, living room, office, bedroom, walk-in closet, baby room, bathroom	488

Table 1. Summary of spaces and objects in *Unpacking*.

Content analysis of *Unpacking* was done by cataloguing the objects that players unpack in each stage of the game. The catalogue organised objects by stage and assigned a distinct colour to each object based on its corresponding stage. The objects were then classified into the following categories and listed alphabetically:

- Art – Objects related to P's artistic pursuits, reflecting her childhood interests and later career as an illustrator.
- Clothing – Items including clothing, shoes, and accessories used by P.
- Entertainment – Objects related to leisure activities such as gaming, music, and viewing devices.
- Books – Literary materials, including books for entertainment and career reference.
- Toiletries – Personal hygiene and self-care products.
- Kitchen – Items used in the kitchen environment.
- Decorations – Plushies, souvenirs, photos, and artworks created by P.

The alphabetised list identified objects that appeared across multiple stages, highlighting recurring items. Objects of particular significance—those that contributed to inferences about P's personal story—were then analysed in detail.

The discussion is structured on the semiotic resources employed by the game as based on Caroux et al.'s player videogame interactions and Naelen et al.'s minimalist game design principles with a particular focus on the narrative aspect of the objects and spaces. The following table is used to structure the analysis of the game:

Caroux et al. (2015): Player–videogame interactions		**Naelen et al. (2011): Minimalist game design principles**	**Semiotic resources employed in *Unpacking***
Input/output information	Visual displays	Deliberate, minimal, abstracted, stylised	Pixel graphics, limited space, objects not labelled
	Auditory displays	Deliberate, minimal, abstracted	Foley sound effects, background music
	Ways of control	Deliberate, confined	Mouse or console control input
Contents	Challenge	Procedural methods, combinatorial complexity, obfuscation, probability	No tutorial, no dialogue, limited text
	Difficulty		No time pressure, no scoring system
	Narrative	Thematic, imagination stimulation, deliberate, obfuscation	Inference based on establishing connections between spaces and objects through the various stages
	Gameplay	Simplified or few, small rulesets, narrow decision-making	Navigation between rooms, placement of objects, some spaces only P's items can be moved
Player modes	Multiplayer	Either mode is used in minimalist game design	Single-player experience creates intimacy with the protagonist

Table 2: Semiotic resources framework for analysis.

Deliberate minimal input/output information

This section analyses how the game's minimalist input/output mechanisms enhance player engagement and contribute to narrative construction within the theoretical frameworks discussed.

The game provides no tutorial or explicit instructions on objectives or controls. Instead, players must interact with objects intuitively, clicking and experimenting at their own pace. The absence of a time limit reinforces a leisurely, exploratory approach, allowing players to organically discover mechanics and spatial relationships.

Realistic pixel graphics ensure that players recognise functional spaces (bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, etc.) and intuitively determine where objects belong. The isometric perspective provides a clear view of room structures and potential object placements. Audio design also plays a role in reinforcing interactions, as objects produce distinct sounds depending on the surfaces they are placed upon. The player can

move between different rooms, manipulate storage spaces (cupboards, drawers, etc.), and reposition objects. Some objects adjust automatically based on placement—clothing folds when near a wardrobe, books shift to a vertical position on shelves—subtly guiding interaction while maintaining a narrow sense of agency. These limited but intentional interactions reinforce the cosy, puzzle-like nature of the game.

The deliberate choice of minimal input/output information aligns with the theoretical framing. Gameplay and narrative emerge through player-driven discovery rather than direct exposition, relating to the concept of narratives of disclosure. Providing the player with only the mise-en-scène to interact with focuses the player's attention to the importance of the space and objects. The narrative progression over stages allows the player to realise that changes in the spaces and objects are deliberate and intended for the player to take note of to understand the narrative. But this can only occur if the player has learned to recognise objects over the various stages and what their changes and presence, or absence thereof, in a specific context implies. This is based on both the shared histories and dark matter concepts.

Unpacking features 1,418 objects, with only a select few reappearing to become focal points of interest to the player. The game relies on the player becoming invested in the objects (as much as P) to recognise the progression over stages and allow reflection on the history of what has taken place starting to anticipate what might occur in the future. Once investment is established between the player and the objects, the concept of dark matter comes into play as the player then starts to infer the amount and type of experiences that happened between the stages.

The objects manifest and exude a presence that communicates with the player, and the sudden absence of an object manifests a strong presence of omission that forces the player to question the reason for the omission and what significance this holds. The minimalist design is not merely an aesthetic choice but an integral mechanism for storytelling.

The joy of *Unpacking* comes from the act of discovery—the recognition of familiar items, the introduction of new ones, and the subsequent realisation of their narrative significance. The game's design ensures that investment contributes to a satisfying and intellectually stimulating experience, as players navigate the layers of meaning embedded in the game's deliberate design.

Obfuscated game contents to structure the narrative

This section discusses how the game contents of challenge, difficulty, and gameplay are structured to enhance the narrative aspect of the game.

The game's challenge level is minimal, which reflects its cosy genre that allows players to choose the depth of their engagement. While the game allows players to

simply move through the motions of *unpacking* without interpreting the significance of the objects, those who become invested trace P's life stages from childhood to parenthood. This in turn affects the difficulty aspect of the game: since little information is provided, the game can be considered difficult in the sense that it requires a tremendous amount of investment on the part of the player to uncover the narrative. Without this investment, the depth of the narrative can be lost or only partially interpreted.

The narrative aspect of *Unpacking* is its focus and therefore all the videogame interactions are deliberately designed to provide cues to the player to uncover the narrative. The fabula, which is the life story of P, is conveyed through the syuzhet, which comprises the deliberate limitations on spaces and choice of objects available to unpack in each stage.

Unlike traditional narrative-driven games that rely on dialogue and cutscenes, *Unpacking* follows a design philosophy similar to other minimalist narrative games such as *Florence* (Mountains, 2018), *The Stillness of the Wind* (Lambic Studios, 2019), *Assemble with Care* (Ustwo, 2019), and *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023). While each of these games integrates narrative and gameplay through subtle environmental storytelling, *Unpacking* uniquely structures its narrative through mise-en-scène rather than visible character interaction or textual exposition.

For example, *Florence* (2018) conveys the protagonist's emotional journey through puzzle mechanics that shift in complexity to reflect the distinct stages of her relationship. *Unpacking* similarly externalises emotional experiences but does so through object placement and absence, requiring players to infer relational tensions and character development. *The Stillness of the Wind* (2019) tells its story through the protagonist's slow-paced farm work and cryptic letters from distant family members, juxtaposing the mundane with a growing sense of unease. *Unpacking* also uses environmental storytelling, relying solely on shifting domestic spaces and the presence or lack thereof in possessions.

In Assemble with Care (2019), the protagonist repairs sentimental possessions, learning about their owners' struggles through dialogue-driven interactions. While both games centre on objects, *Unpacking* shifts the focus from repairing to *unpacking*, emphasising personal history rather than interpersonal relationships. Likewise, *Venba* (2023) explicitly foregrounds cultural identity through cooking mechanics, where players reconstruct lost Tamil recipes as a metaphor for preserving heritage. In contrast, *Unpacking* presents cultural identity more subtly, weaving it into the recurring presence—or absence—of objects tied to the protagonist's background.

Spatial restrictions for narrative depth

The game's stages communicate various aspects of P's life, including her financial status, relationships, and personal growth. The following discussion describes the

restrictions imposed on the stages of the game to demonstrate how the player must engage with these deliberate gameplay choices to uncover the narrative and infer P's character development. The dark matter concept is exemplified here as the game takes place over twenty-one years of P's life but only eight stages during this period are presented to the player, requiring them to infer missing details through environmental storytelling.

P's early life and emerging identity (1997–2004)

In the first stage, P moves into her first private bedroom (the game implies she previously shared with her sister). The room is small but comfortable and hints at a garden outside. This demonstrates a middle-class financial situation, supported by the presence of gaming devices and a fair number of toys. With no spatial restrictions, this stage allows P full agency over her space, serving as an introduction to the player as they experiment and become familiar with the mechanics. At this point, the narrative is not yet clear in the first playthrough.

The second stage further supports P's family's financial status as comfortable but not wealthy. The university dormitory P moves into is modest and shows elements of structural damage to the bedroom walls and kitchen floor, while the mismatched crockery suggests they are hand-me-downs. She enters this space with a few childhood possessions, reinforcing her sentimental nature. With a seven-year time gap, this stage sets the tone for the rest of the game, where the player recognises objects that accompany her from the previous stage, notes which ones were left behind, and focuses on the new objects to determine what P came to study.

Expanding social and professional life (2007–2010)

In the third stage, P moves into a commune with friends, marking the first indication of interpersonal relationships outside her family. The commune introduces spatial restrictions by preventing the player from moving her friends' possessions or entering their bedrooms. Their shared interests—gaming, cosplay, plushies, and ornamental fantasy figures—further establish a communal bond. P starts a part-time job (evidenced by the work uniform) while attempting to build her illustrator career, as seen in the presence of art supplies, stationery, and digital devices.

In the fourth stage, she moves in with a boyfriend. The apartment has only one bedroom with a double bed, establishing intimacy between the two inhabitants. This stage highlights a difference in their financial status and personal tastes. His upmarket apartment, free of structural damage, is filled with high-quality possessions, including a large LCD television, large speakers, and a modern furniture set. These contrast with P's softer, more homey possessions. Unlike the previous stage, the player can freely move around the boyfriend's possessions, a lifted restriction that furthers the narrative. However, making space for P's belongings becomes quite a

challenge in the confined space. The aesthetic clash between their tastes communicates a difference in their personalities.

The narratives of disclosure (Tavinor) are particularly relevant here, as the limited space in the boyfriend's apartment forces players to navigate and interpret the constraints placed on P's identity. The act of hiding or storing personal objects symbolises the struggle of assimilation within the relationship, reinforcing narrative themes through interactive discovery rather than overt exposition. This stage subtly foreshadows the eventual breakup, as P is forced to store her items in less prominent places, symbolising the lack of space for her identity within the relationship.

Transition, emotional reconnecting, and growth (2012–2013)

Returning to her parents' home after the breakup, P must once again rearrange objects to fit her belongings. This stage plays a crucial narrative role, as the player rediscovers objects from the first stage—P's childhood. The interaction with these items fosters a shared history between the player and P, reinforcing nostalgia and emphasising the passage of time (Gillespie). Fifteen years have passed, and P's old bedroom has been repurposed into a sewing/storage space. The sewing motif reflects the mending of her broken heart, further emphasised by the worn state of her beloved pink pig. Notably, if the player pins a photo of P and her ex-boyfriend on the board, she places a pin through his face—a subtle but powerful expression of her feelings. This stage also requires the player to store the ex-boyfriend's photo out of sight before advancing, reinforcing P's emotional resolution.

In the sixth stage, P transitions to her first independent home, suggesting a rebirth following her breakup. She brings along select childhood possessions (frog plushie, duck plushie, alarm clock), symbolising a reconnection with her past self. Her growing career focus is reflected in the presence of a home office, new illustration materials, and the absence of the part-time work uniform. Her financial situation is subtly communicated through the apartment's structural damage and limited furnishings, such as bean bags instead of couches.

Relationship with girlfriend and stability towards resolution (2015–2018)

In the seventh stage, P's girlfriend moves in, marking the only instance where the player unpacks items that do not belong to P. Over two years, the living space has evolved to reflect P's growing success as an illustrator, evident in the improved furniture and decor. The player must move P's possessions around to make space for the girlfriend, but unlike the boyfriend stage, the girlfriend's possessions blend seamlessly with P's, reinforcing their compatibility. For instance, the girlfriend's tiger plushie complements P's pink pig, symbolising their shared interests and emotional harmony.

The final stage, the largest in the game, represents P's successful life. The house is pristine, with no scuff marks, peeling paint, or water damage. In P's home office, copies of the book she illustrated about the pink pig—now an award-winning project—showcase her professional achievements. Most possessions from three years ago remain, suggesting continuity and stability in her relationship with her girlfriend. Their impending parenthood is indicated by the presence of baby items, reinforcing their shared happiness and long-term commitment.

Throughout these eight stages, the player never directly witnesses P's life events but instead infers them from the condition, arrangement, or absence of objects. This aligns with Sofer's concept of dark matter, where narrative meaning emerges from omission and suggestion rather than explicit exposition. Additionally, Gillespie's notion of shared histories offers insight into the emotional weight of recurring objects in *Unpacking*. Having grown familiar with P's belongings, the observant player vicariously experiences her journey, developing an understanding of key events in her life.

Inferring P's cultural and personal identity

The concept of narratives of disclosure allows the player to gradually uncover P's cultural and personal identity.

P's Jewish heritage is subtly indicated in her childhood bedroom by a dreidel. As she matures, this aspect of her identity appears to fade, only to resurface later in life when she unpacks a Hamsa and Hanukkah candles—suggesting a renewed connection to her cultural roots. Unlike *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023), which explicitly foregrounds cultural identity through interactive cooking mechanics, *Unpacking* presents heritage as a subtle yet meaningful thread in P's life. This reinforces Sofer's dark matter, where elements of P's identity are not explicitly presented but instead inferred through their absence and later reappearance. The player experiences a quiet realisation of this reconnection.

Similarly, P's gender identity is revealed gradually through her possessions rather than through direct characterisation. Initially ambiguous, her biological female identity becomes evident through feminine-coded items such as underwear and tampons. However, *Unpacking* avoids the common gaming trope of sensationalising gender representation, opting instead for a naturalistic approach. This subtlety extends to her evolving gender expression. As a young adult, she favours androgynous clothing—t-shirts and baggy jeans—but later incorporates more traditionally feminine attire. Notably, this shift coincides with her relationship with her boyfriend, whereas her later relationship with a girlfriend does not produce a similar change. This contrast suggests that, earlier in life, P may have been more influenced by societal expectations or a desire to conform to her partner's preferences.

Beyond gender, P's personal growth is reflected in the evolution of her possessions. Her ex-boyfriend introduces her to lifestyle changes, such as transitioning from instant coffee to French press and learning the ukulele to complement his guitar playing. While their relationship ends, these interests persist, symbolising how personal development often stems from relationships, even after they have ended. This is reinforced in the game's end credits, where P plays the ukulele for her partner and newborn, demonstrating how objects in *Unpacking* function as carriers of personal narrative and emotional history, in line with Gillespie's shared histories concept. Similarly, her career as an illustrator flourishes after the breakup, implying that personal loss fuels her professional ambition. The placement of her degree—proudly displayed in all her previous living spaces but relegated to the closet or under the bed when she moves in with her boyfriend—suggests a period of diminished self-expression within that relationship.

The game also subtly acknowledges P's physical health. Exercise equipment follows her through various stages, but in later years, the presence of back pain medication and a cane signals a significant shift. This unexpected limitation evokes a sense of loss, as the active lifestyle she once enjoyed is now constrained by chronic pain. This gradual removal of once-important objects mirrors the earlier instances of objects that disappear and later re-emerge, reinforcing a cyclical pattern of loss and reconnection.

Intimacy with the protagonist through the mode

The combination of narratives of disclosure with the shared histories fosters a unique intimacy between the player and P through the single-player mode. The mode, coupled with the cosy nature of the game, allows the player to enter a meditative space of comfortable play.

As discussed before, the considerate intertwining of narrative and gameplay assures that the engaged player would have built an emotional history with P. The developments in her life as witnessed through her space and possession developments mirror the sentimental attachments that players would recognise in their own real lives.

Dark matter also aids in this process by not explicitly presenting P's physical form or voice. However, her presence is deeply felt by the player due to their intimacy with her which is based on them having interacted with her most precious possessions. This intimacy ensures that the player's experience of P's losses is also poignant, as they gain insight into the things P enjoys and is passionate about, only to witness the impact of unexpected events that alter her life. For example, her active lifestyle becomes a source of loss when chronic back pain becomes a debilitating factor. Yet, there is also a joy to be found in P's successes, such as the publication of her book, which is inspired by her beloved pink pig.

P's life is portrayed as a series of ordinary, relatable events rather than a sequence of dramatic or traumatic experiences. This choice aligns with the game's cosy genre, which eschews high-stakes conflict in favour of depicting everyday life. The game's narrative avoids delving into darker or more complex topics, presenting instead a straightforward journey marked by personal growth, relationships, and self-discovery. This approach offers a refreshing contrast to the often intense and conflict-driven narratives common in videogames, suggesting that life need not be filled with dramatic events to be meaningful or worthy of exploration. This further enhances the intimacy, as the player was privy to the key moments in P's life and observed how she made decisions and their outcomes.

The authenticity of *Unpacking* has been widely praised, particularly for its ability to depict an LGBTQIA+ relationship without making it the focal point of the narrative. Unlike many games that foreground a character's sexuality to appeal to contemporary trends or fan interests, *Unpacking* integrates this aspect of P's life naturally and unobtrusively. The relationship between P and her girlfriend is presented as just one part of her life, woven seamlessly into the broader narrative. This understated approach reflects the game's commitment to authenticity and its focus on the subtleties of everyday life.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Unpacking* demonstrates that minimalist storytelling, when underpinned by a strong theoretical framework, can produce deeply immersive and emotionally resonant experiences. The game's reliance on mise-en-scène, environmental storytelling, and player interpretation aligns closely with Tavinor's narratives of discovery, Gillespie's shared histories, and Sofer's dark matter. These frameworks collectively highlight how *Unpacking* allows players to infer a rich, evolving narrative without ever directly presenting the protagonist or engaging in conventional storytelling techniques.

Tavinor's (2009) insights into player-driven narrative discovery are evident in *Unpacking*, where players actively reconstruct the protagonist's story by observing recurring objects, shifting spaces, and evolving spatial restrictions. The game's design encourages the player to unearth meaning through inference, reinforcing the power of narratives of disclosure in digital storytelling. The absence of explicit direction fosters a deeper connection between the player and the game world, demonstrating how minimalist design can enhance emotional and cognitive engagement.

Gillespie's (2014) shared histories concept is central to understanding how objects gain narrative weight over time, reinforcing continuity and attachment. The recurrence of meaningful items, such as the pink pig and P's art supplies, fosters a sense of familiarity and progression, allowing players to construct a narrative based on accumulated meaning.

Sofer's (2013) dark matter is integral to how the game conveys loss, change, and identity through absence, as seen in missing objects and repurposed spaces that signify unspoken transitions in the protagonist's life. The deliberate omission of explanatory text or dialogue compels players to speculate and fill in gaps, making the experience deeply personal and subjective. This approach highlights the effectiveness of omission as a narrative device, demonstrating how what is unseen or implied can shape player perception just as powerfully as what is visually present. The use of dark matter in conjunction with shared histories manifests a presence that carries more weight through its reaffirmation in spaces. The more established the history between the player and the object, the more presence is created in the absence of the object in the space.

Beyond *Unpacking*, this study has broader implications for game design and narrative theory. The techniques analysed in this paper—mise-en-scène, environmental storytelling, and minimalist design—can be applied to various genres beyond identity-focused games. Games in genres such as survival horror, open-world exploration, and interactive fiction also employ similar mechanics to convey narrative depth without relying on traditional exposition. By examining how mise-en-scène, object interaction, and spatial constraints shape narrative experiences, this study highlights the significance of minimalist design in interactive storytelling and its potential for broader application in game studies.

This study contributes to game studies by offering a framework for analysing how environmental storytelling conveys character identity. The findings emphasise the role of mise-en-scène as an active participant in narrative construction, demonstrating how videogames can engage players through inference, discovery, and emotional resonance rather than prescriptive storytelling methods. Moving forward, future research could extend this analysis to other games that rely on minimalist storytelling techniques, further solidifying the role of mise-en-scène in shaping videogame narratives.

References

Adhyaksana, N. L. (2019). A strong independent (video game) women? Examining Red from *Transistor* (2014). *Alphabet*, *2*(1), 12–24. https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.alphabet.2019.02.01.02

Arsenopoulou, N., Poupou, A., & Rizopoulos, C. (2023). Games as cinematic experiences: Discussing filmic modes and ludic elements in video-game storytelling. In X. Fang (Ed.) *HCI in Games: 5th International Conference, HCI-Games 2023, held as part of the 25th HCI International Conference, HCII 2023, Copenhagen, Denmark, July*

23–28, 2023, Proceedings Part I. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-35930-9_2

Beasly, B., & Standley, T. C. (2009). Shirts vs skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender roles stereotyping in video games. *Mass Communication & Society*, *5*(3), 279–293. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0503_3

Behm-Morawitz, E., & Mastro, D. (2009). The effects of the sexualisation of female video game characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept. *Sex Roles*, *61*, 808–823. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9683-8

Bethesda Game Studios. (2011). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Microsoft Windows]. Digital game directed by Todd Howard, published by Bethesda Softworks.

Bristot, P. C., Pozzebon, E., Frigo, L. B., Canal, F. Z., & Da Rosa Carraro, J. A. (2019). Female representation in video games. *CLEI Electronic Journal*, *22*(2), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.19153/cleiej.22.2.7

Caroux, L., Isbister, K., Le Bigot, L., & Vibert, N. (2015). Player–video game interaction: A systematic review of current concepts. *Computer in Human Behavior, 48*, 366–381. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.01.066

De Oliveira Matumoto, A., & Goncalves-Segundo, P. R. (2022). Towards a social-semiotic approach to visual analysis of two-dimensional games: A toolkit. *Texto Livre Linguagem e Tecnologia*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.35699/1983-3652.2022.39398

Deldjoo, Y., Garzotto, F., Elahi, M., Piazzolla, P., & Cremonesi, P. (2016). Recommending movies based on mise-en-scene design. *CHI EA '16: Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1540–1547). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/2851581.2892551

Engelbrecht, J. (2020). The new Lara phenomenon: A postfeminist analysis of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. *Game Studies*, *20*(3). https://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/engelbrecht

Gillespie, B. (2014). Que(e)rying theatrical objects. In M. Schweitzer, & J. Zerdy (Eds.), *Performing objects & theatrical things* (pp. 149–160). Palgrave Macmillan.

Girina, I. (2013). Video game mise-en-scene remediation of cinematic codes in video games. In Koenitz, H., Sezen, T. I., Ferri, G., Haahr, M., Sezen, D., & Çatak, G. (Eds.), *Interactive storytelling: ICIDS 2013*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02756-2_5

Jansz, J., & Martis, R. G. (2007). The Lara phenomenon: Powerful female characters in video games. *Sex Roles*, *56*, 141–148. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9158-0

Lambic Studios. (2019). *The stillness of the wind* [Nintendo Switch]. Digital game published by Fellow Traveler.

Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., Van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. (2016). Sexy, strong, and secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years. *Journal of Communication*, *66*(4), 564–584. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12237

MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2014). "Take that, bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in feminist game narratives. *Game Studies*, *14*(2). https://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart

Mountains. (2018). *Florence* [iOS]. Digital game directed by Ken Wong, published by Annapurna Interactive.

Munters, G. M. (2017). The performative acts of gender representation in video games*. Academia.edu.* https://www.academia.edu/34394725/The_Performative_Acts_of_Gender_Representation_in_Video_Games

Naelen, A., Saltsman, A., & Boxerman, E. (2011). Towards minimalist game design. In M. Cavazza, K. Isbister, & C. Rich (Eds.), *FDG '11: Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (pp. 38–45). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/2159365.2159371

Pérez-Latorre, O., Oliva, M., & Besalú, R. (2017). Videogame analysis: A social-semiotic approach. *Social semiotics, 27*(5), 586–603. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2016.1191146

Perrault, M. F., Perrault, G. P., Jenkins, J., & Morrison, A. (2016). Depictions of female protagonists in digital games: A narrative analysis of 2013 DICE award-winning digital games. *Games and Culture*, *13*(8), 843–860. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016679584

Sa, F., Alípio, L. F., & Albino, M. (2020). Designing the body: Female monster design in video games. *International Conference on Illustration & Animation* (pp. 543–552). CONFIA 2020.

Sofer, J. A. (2013). *Dark matter.* University of Michigan Press.

Süngü, E. (2020). Gender representation and diversity in contemporary video games. In B. Bostan (Ed.), *Game user experience and player-centred design* (pp. 379–393). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37643-7_17

Tavinor, G. (2009). *The art of video games.* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Toh, W. (2019). *A multimodal approach to video games and the player experience.* Routledge.

Ulas, E. S. (2014). Virtual environment design and storytelling in video games. *Metavese Creativity, 4*(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1386/mvcr.4.1.75_1

Ustwo. (2019). *Assemble with care* [iOS]. Digital game published by Ustwo.

Utsch, S., Braganca, L. C., Ramos, P., Caldeira, P., & Tenorio, J. (2017). Queer identities in video games: Data visualisation for a quantitative analysis of representation. *Proceedings of SBGames* (pp. 847–854). SBGames. https://www.sbgames.org/sbgames2017/papers/CulturaFull/175360.pdf

Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics.* Routledge.

Visai Games. (2023). *Venba* [Nintendo Switch]. Digital game published by Visai Games.

Witch Beam. (2021). *Unpacking* [Microsoft Windows]. Digital game directed by Wren Brier, published by Humble Bundle.

Witch Beam. (2024). Unpacking. *Steam Store*. https://store.steampowered.com/app/1135690/Unpacking/

Worthen, W. B. (2014). Dark matter: Invisibility in drama, theater, and performance by Andrew J. Sofer (review). *Theatre Journal, 66*(3), 495–496. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2014.0080