

GDC

March 21-25, 2022
San Francisco, CA

Unpacking a Narrative Through 1,000 Household Items

by Wren Brier
& Tim Dawson
from
Witch Beam

#GDC22



Wren

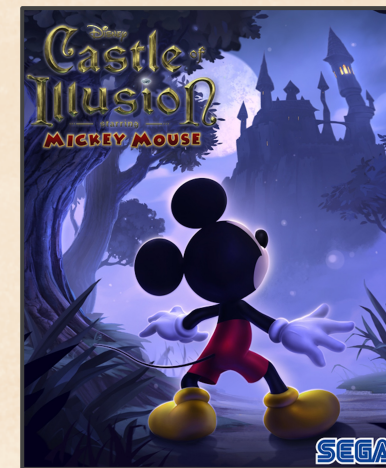
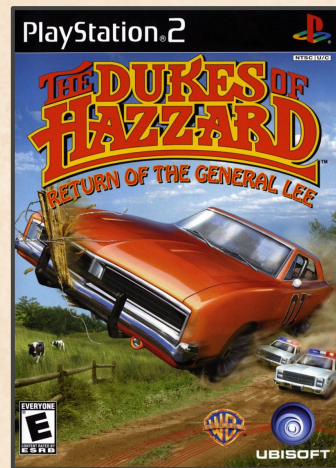
Creative Director



- **Before Unpacking:** art, animation, UX/UI, production
- **On Unpacking:** the above + narrative, game design, level design, bizdev...

Tim

Technical Director



- Worked as an animator before co-founding Witch Beam in 2013
- **On Unpacking:** programming, game design + many other bits and pieces

unpacking

- Witch Beam's second title
- PC & console game
- 3.5 years in development
- Released November last year



unpacking



A story game masquerading as an organising game



Unpacking's narrative

- Nearly wordless
- No on-screen characters
- Linear narrative
- Subtle
- Through handling items players are forced to consider each one

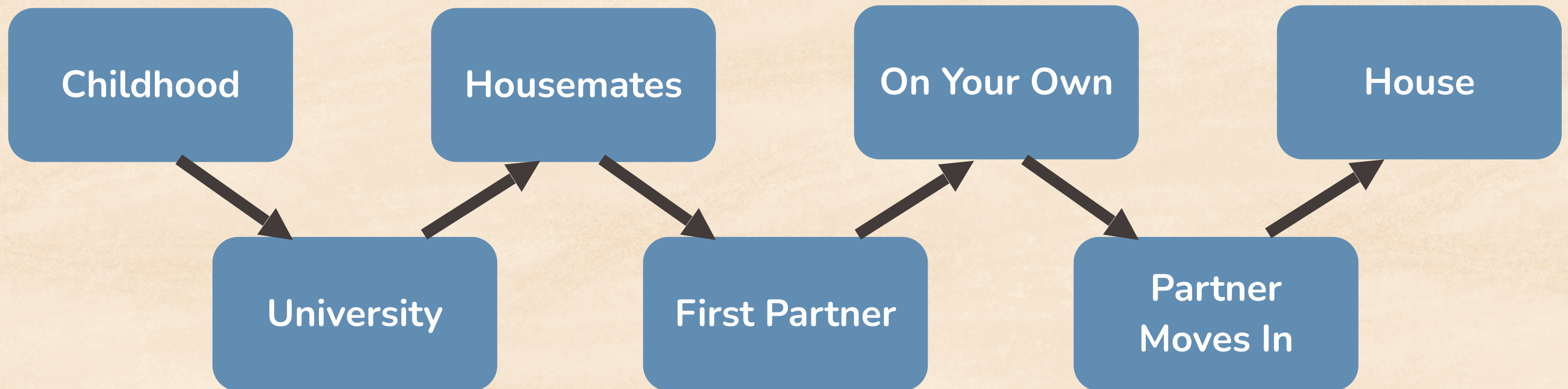


Blocking out the narrative



Initial outline: 7 snapshots

- Convenient premise: Moves tend to line up with major life events
- 7 chronological snapshots of a character's life



Unpacking your bedroom as a child



Design

- Tutorial: small & simple

Narrative

- Natural beginning for the story
- Protagonist old enough to unpack her things

Moving away for university



Design

- Multiple rooms, new room types

Narrative

- Continuity between stages
- Leaving the nest
- Pursuing ambitions

Moving in with housemates



Design

- Additional characters whose items can't move

Narrative

- Making the character's life bigger
- Filling an empty slot
- Immovable items reflect comfort level

Moving in with your first partner



Design

- Additional character whose items *can* move

Narrative

- Movable items reflect increased intimacy
- Turning a one-person space into shared space
- A relationship that will not work out

Moving out on your own



Design

- Unpacking a whole apartment from scratch

Narrative

- Implies a break-up
- Apartment feels big and empty
- A fresh start

A partner moves in with you



Design

- Same space but unpacking for someone else

Narrative

- Builds on previous stage
- Contrast with first partner
- Intimacy of helping someone else unpack

Moving into a house



Design

- Grand finale – biggest space, tons of items

Narrative

- House used as shorthand for stability
- Two lives entwined
- Generational story arc

The missing stage

- The fifth stage had conflicting identities
- We were trying to cover too much in a single point in time
- It made an unintentional statement about our protagonist

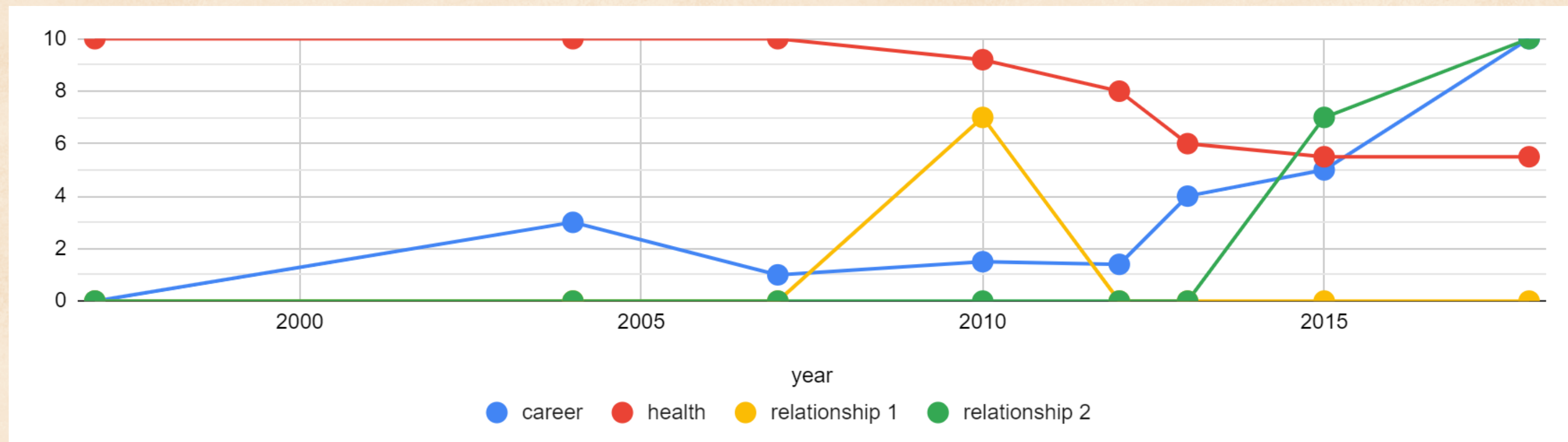
The missing stage



- The solution: An extra stage
- better control the game's emotional pacing
- Move back in with parents
 - art reuse
 - shows teenage protagonist
 - relatable gut punch
 - feeling of moving backwards

Character progression graph

- Graph tracks different major story threads over time
- Not a story about someone always getting what they want



Why not a branching narrative?

- You could affect the story in many ways! But...
 - Judgement
 - FOMO
 - Introduces a way to get an outcome you didn't want
- Instead, we give the player endless choices, but no consequences

Portraying characters through items



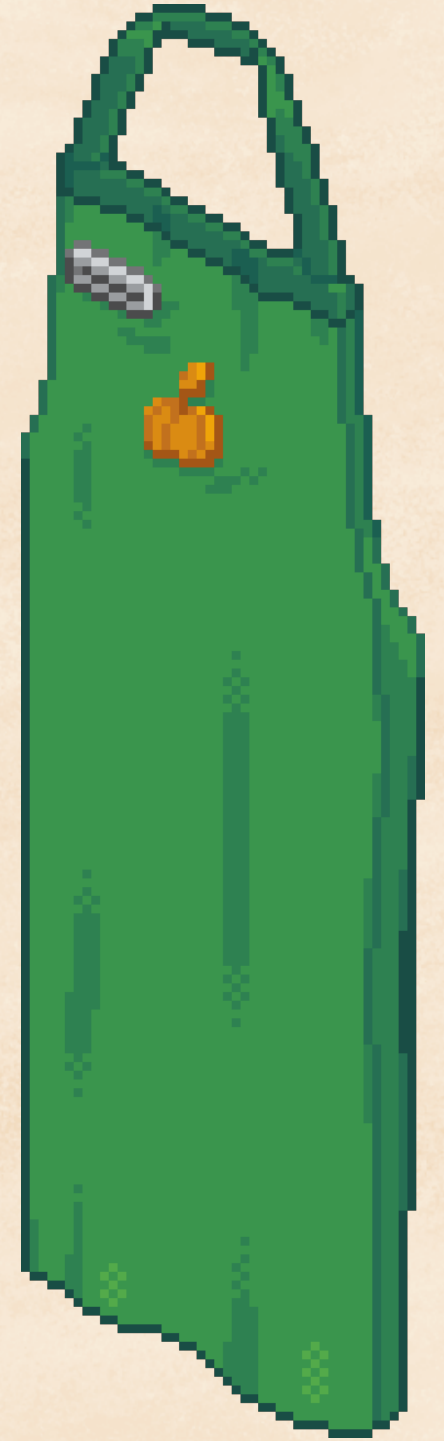
Mechanics shaped the story

- Absent characters = belongings do the work
- Any trait has corresponding items
- No item? No trait!
- A “silhouette”



Limitations

- Some concepts did not lend themselves well to items
 - Complex backstories
 - Side character's lives
 - Some personality traits
- Can't depict specific events between moves
- Had to accept ambiguity



Character study: housemate



Hobbies & Interests



Profession & Personality



Cultural background



Creating empathy



Empathy through detective work

- Through handling each item players are forced to consider each one
- Familiar objects and situations allow players to relate and project
- Depriving the player of definitive answers provokes theories and hunches
- We place trust in the player to piece the story together

The “villain” you never meet

- The intention: portray a relationship that doesn't work out
- Fancy apartment, compares favourably to previous place
- Not a terrible person, more ambiguous than that
- The bad feeling about him creeps up on you



A bad match

- style and colours clash
- hobbies and interests have minimal overlap
- different lifestyles

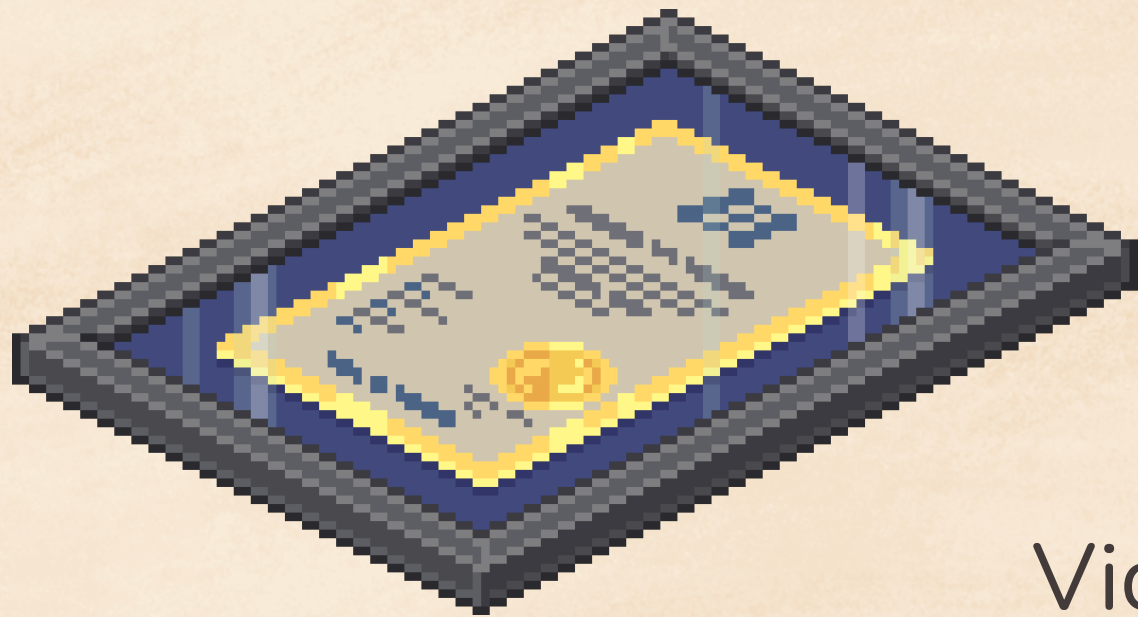


A bad fit

- Unpacking items reveals otherwise unnoticed deficiencies
- Player likely to discover they can move boyfriend's items through frustration
- Protagonist is left to make room for herself - physically and emotionally
- The narrative is driven by game design considerations

The Diploma

- The culmination of our rules for creating empathy
- Epitomises the incompatibility between protagonist and boyfriend
- Player has to realise this themselves and capitulate



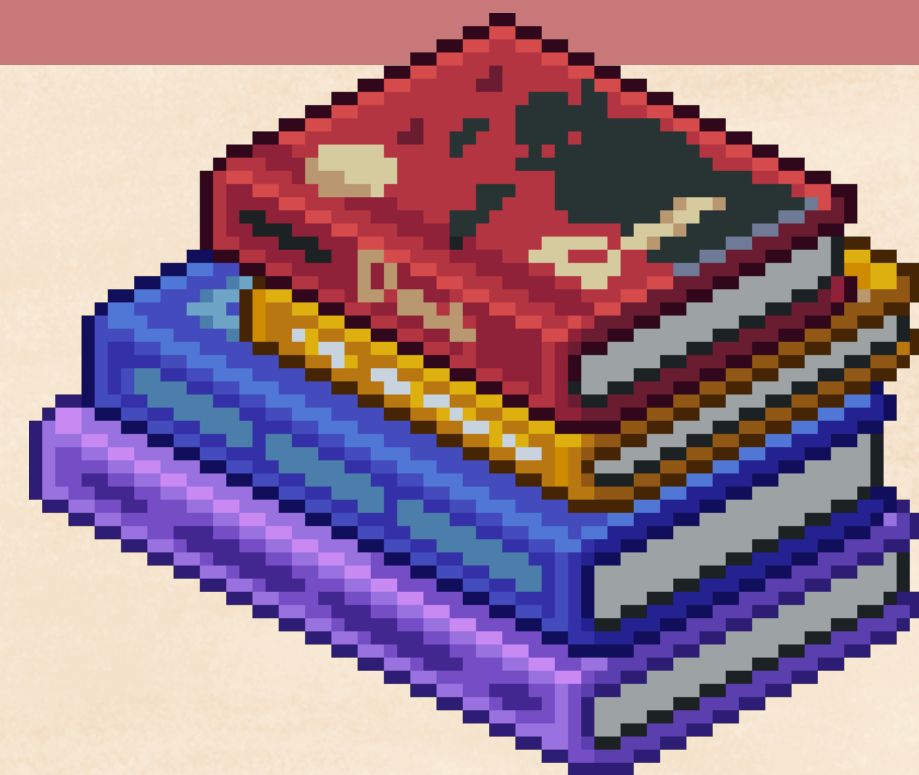
Video credit: youtube.com/psychgeist / [@DrKowert](https://twitter.com/DrKowert)

Bad friction vs good friction

- *Will* the player realise it?
- Should we reduce friction?
- The friction emphasises the narrative beat
- We trust that the player trusts us



Storytelling techniques & tricks



Item order

- authored with storytelling intent



- chaos communicates personality and circumstance

Throughlines through item changes

- an evolving sense of fashion
- growing and declining hobbies and interests
- the life and death of a pet beetle



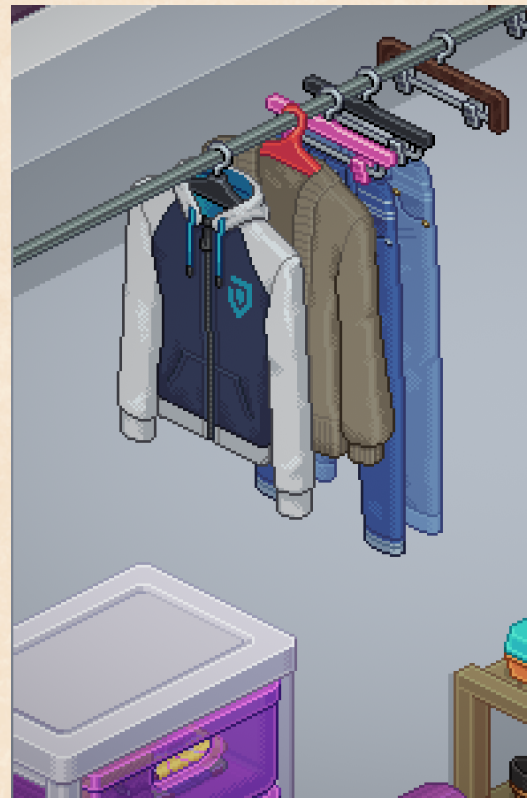
Wear and tear

- Planned from beginning but only added near the end
- Very few items do this but gives the illusion all items are ageing



Impact of characters through items

Through change of ownership



Through influence



Everything reinforces the narrative

- UX/UI: the album
- Photo flavour text confirms + deepens the story
- Easter eggs

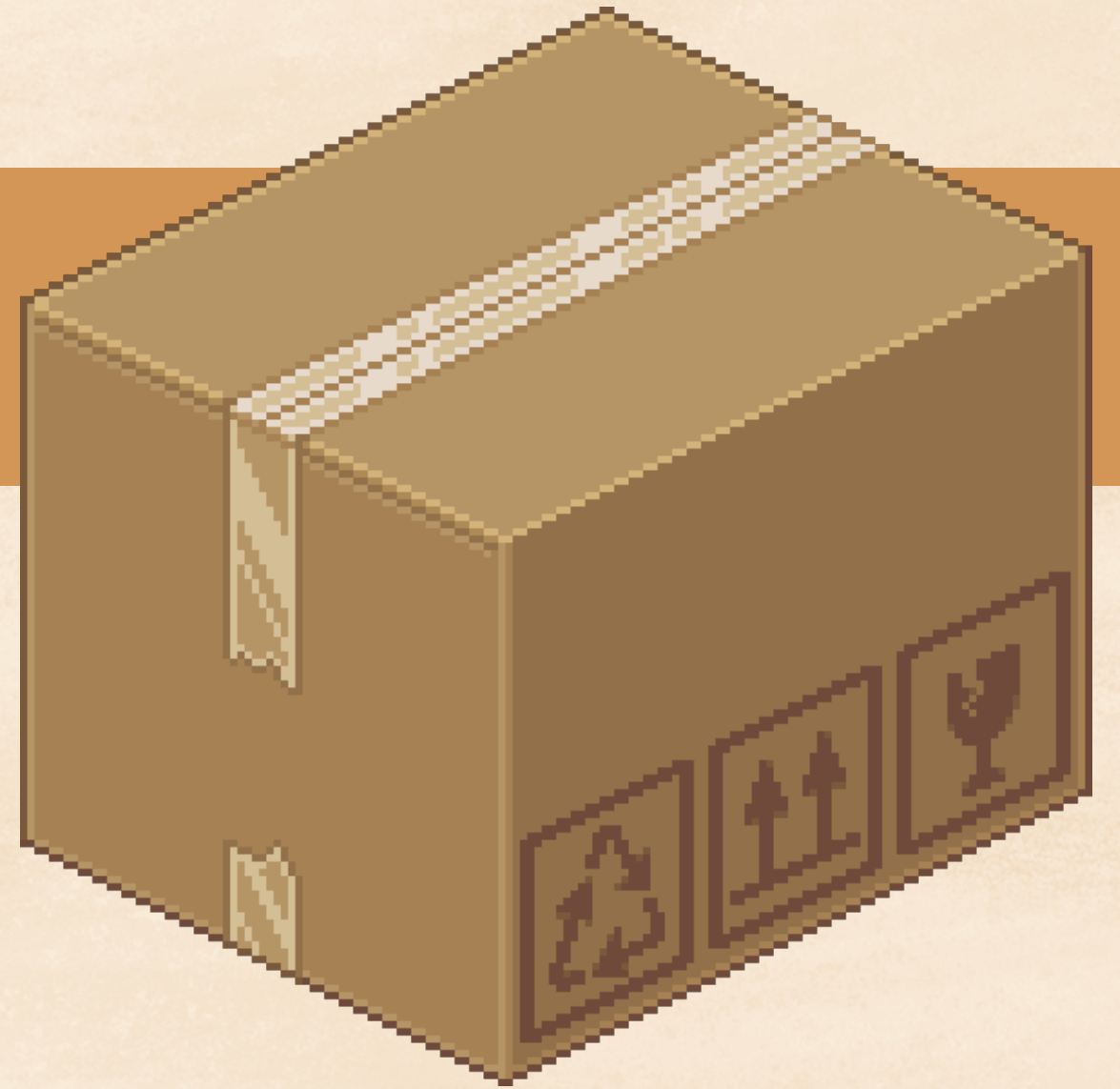


Validation system

- Usually quite lax but occasionally used forcefully
- Diary
- Diploma moment
- preventing an ex's photo from being hung up



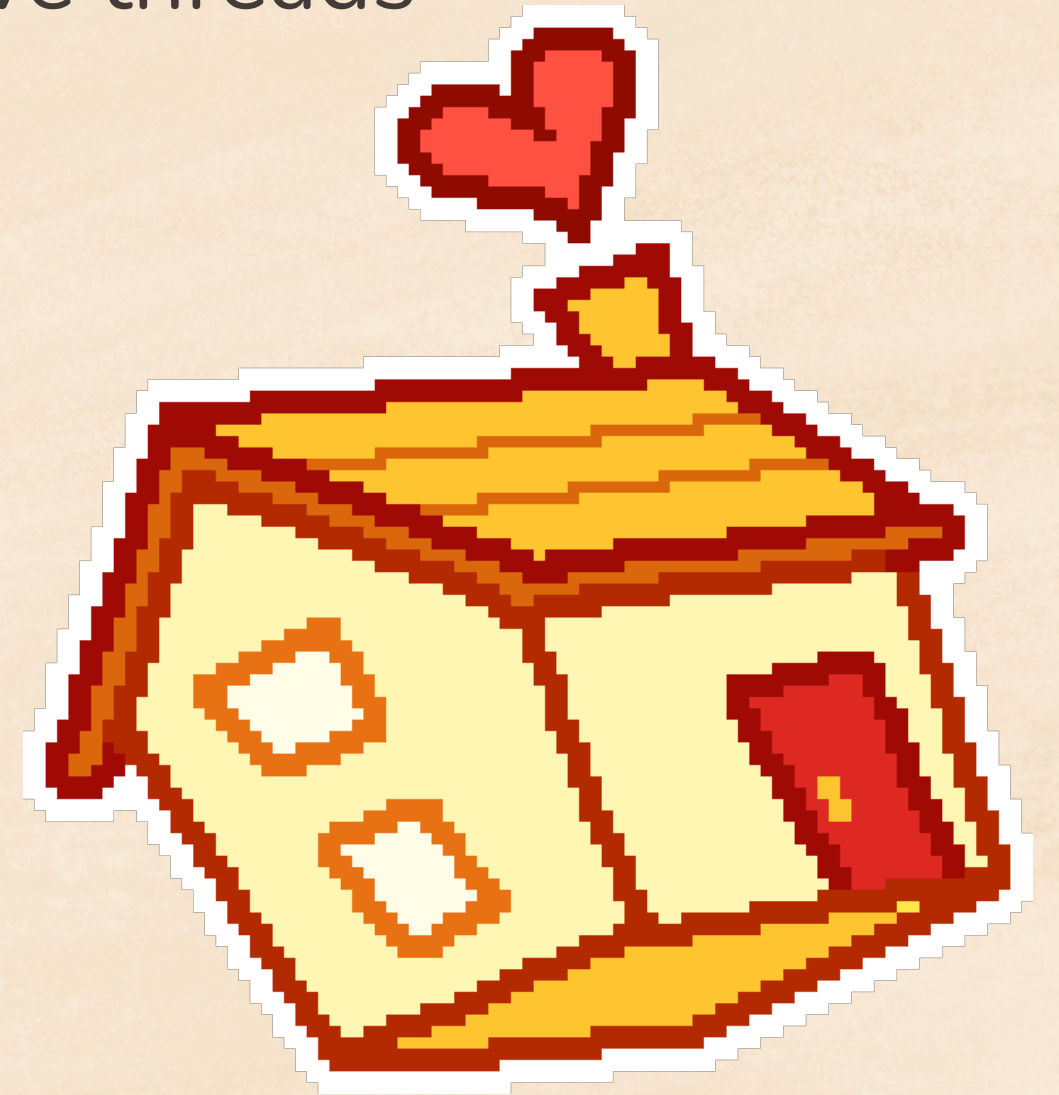
Wrap-up and Send-off



The Final Stage

The move into a house addresses all major narrative threads

- Career
- Relationships
- Health
- The story comes full circle



Credits Sequence

- Another opportunity for storytelling
- Utilised photos from the playthrough to personalise the experience



Credits Sequence

- Credits song brings together core themes
- Ends on reveal of the protagonist and her new family





Summary

- Mechanics shape the story
- Bold, broad-strokes characters
- Progression of items = character progression
- Player figuring out the story creates empathy with the character
- Every element of the game is a chance for storytelling



Thank you!



Questions?

Wren Brier

@wrenegadey

wrenegadey@gmail.com



Tim Dawson

@ironicaccount

tim@witchbeam.com.au