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Lesley Speed

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Transnational suburbia: suburban settings in Australian video games

Lesley Speed

Institute of Education Arts and Community, Federation University, Ballarat, Australia

ABSTRACT

Video games with suburban settings offer distinctive experiences of quotidian environments. This article examines how Australian games set in homes or verdant residential neighbourhoods contribute to a global circulation of ideas about suburban life. It contributes to understanding the relationship between Australian games and Australian society by showing how gameworlds that represent everyday spatial environments exist at intersections of the global and the local. By using suburbia as a focal point for demonstrating how Australian games can be read on both international and local levels, the article explores an alternative to a cultural nationalist approach. The Australian games examined are *Rumu* (Robot House, 2017), *Roombo: First Blood* (Samurai Punk, 2019), *Mars Underground* (Moloch Media, 2019), *Moving Out* (SMG Studio and DevM Games, 2020), *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2020) and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021). This article argues that by positioning suburbia as both familiar and foreign, games offer experiences of virtual travel and exploration that contribute to re-imagining everyday environments. While addressing universal themes such as moving house and domestic labour, these games can also be understood in relation to Australian cultural traditions and contexts.

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Australian video games participate in an international circulation of ideas about suburban environments. This article contributes to discourse about cultural aspects of Australian-developed games by using suburban settings as a focal point for examining how games can be read on both international and local levels. While targeting international markets by invoking globally recognized ideas about quotidian residential environments, Australian games with suburban settings can also be understood in relation to Australian traditions and perspectives. These ideas are explored through six local games: *Rumu* (Robot House, 2017), *Roombo: First Blood* (Samurai Punk, 2019), *Mars Underground* (Moloch Media, 2019), *Moving Out* (SMG Studio and DevM Games, 2020), *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2020) and *Unpacking* (Witch Beam 2021). The article situates these examples in an international context of games with suburban settings. It then examines how games with suburban settings invoke experiences of other simulated

CONTACT Lesley Speed  l.speed@federation.edu.au  Institute of Education Arts and Community, Federation University, Ballarat, Victoria 3353, Australia

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domestic environments that can be understood on both international and local levels, positioning suburban settings as play spaces that can be experienced as both familiar and foreign. While exploring universal themes such as moving house, the banality of suburban life and domestic labour, these games can also be understood in relation to Australian traditions and contexts.

This analysis addresses the task of understanding Australian games' relationship to Australian culture, a task rendered 'difficult' by the medium's pervasive internationalism and lack of an ethos of a 'national game culture' (Schroeder 2011, 322–323). Yet Australian game studies must address this global context. By positioning suburban settings as a focal point for examining how Australian games engage with both international and local ideas and themes, this article explores an alternative to cultural nationalist approaches, which are commonly constrained by notions of national identity and the 'legacy of national cinemas discourse' (Swalwell 2021, 6). In contrast to a framework that privileges the nation over the international, suburban settings provide a focus for understanding how Australian games can be linked to both the global and the Australian. Among the limitations of cultural nationalism is a propensity at times to overlook diversity and to conceptualize the nation as singular, fixed or self-contained. In this article, 'the Australian' is not intended to be understood as homogeneous or fixed but is linked to ideas about suburban environments that are shifting, part of international contexts, and manifested in disparate ways in local games.

Australian games and suburban settings in a transnational perspective

Australian games exemplify that suburban settings are evident in the medium across various genres, graphic styles and gameplay. This article focuses specifically on Australian independent (indie) games, which Brendan Keogh notes form the 'overwhelming majority' of games produced in Australia (Keogh 2021, 121). Whereas games with distinctively Australian content are few (Wilson 2005, 118; Golding 2020, 67) and are not the focus of this article, suburban gameworlds are evident in various Australian games. This article gives attention to the range of Australian games with suburban settings, rather than focusing on a smaller number of high-profile examples that are not necessarily typical. For example, *Rumu*, *Mars Underground* and *Untitled Goose Game* are adventure games. In *Rumu*, the player-character is a robot vacuum cleaner who investigates its inventors' house after the occupants' disappearance. In *Mars Underground*, a boy named Mars repeatedly experiences the same day, 15 March, which he must disrupt to discover secrets in his town of Phobos. In *Untitled Goose Game*, a goose roams an English village, stealing objects and disturbing human environments, including suburban-style back yards. By contrast, *Moving Out* is a physics-based game and *Roombo: First Blood* (henceforth referred to as *Roombo*) an action game. The player in *Moving Out* is a removalist who must carry items from homes to a truck, and in *Roombo* the player is a robot vacuum cleaner who intercepts and attacks intruders in a vacated home. By contrast, *Unpacking* is a puzzle game where the player must arrange the possessions of an unknown woman in homes through a series of domestic removals.

While indie games are produced by smaller companies or individuals outside the operations of AAA or blockbuster game development, indie games are also part of global markets by being circulated on international distribution platforms. Indie games are thus

both part of a global industry and form a distinct sub-area of the industry. Within this context, such games often participate in a practice of mixing references to various cultures that is evident widely across the industry. As John Vanderhoef observes, 'most games are marketed and sold as experiences that occlude their national origins' and are 'in conversation with the production of games and player expectations from other countries and regions' (2021, 164). Examining indie games in terms of whether games 'bespeak the culture in which they are produced' (2021, 159), Vanderhoef argues that an 'imagined transnational identity' usually prevails over ideas of national identity for indie developers (2021, 163). This is reflected in indie games in a range of approaches that extends from the frequent omission of 'national markers' to the less common inclusion of local references (Vanderhoef 2021, 160–161). Vanderhoef draws on the observation by Felan Parker and Jennifer Jenson that indie developers tend to locate their practice 'at the intersection of the global and the local, with only occasional recourse to the national' (Parker and Jenson 2017, 887).

Similarly, Australian games are transnational in drawing influences from both locally and abroad. Just as Australian developers work on games created in other countries, such as local studio Iron Monkey's work on *The Sims Freeplay* (2011) and Secret Lab's involvement with the mobile version of *Night in the Woods* (2013), games that are known in Australia as locally-developed games draw on a geographically wide range of sources. Indeed, the production of *Moving Out* is a transnational collaboration between Australia's SMG Studio and Sweden's DevM Games. At stylistic and thematic levels, too, Australian games draw inspiration from a wide and international range of sources. The emphasis on domestic interiors in *Unpacking* was influenced by *The Sims* and *Gone Home* (Ellen 2019), of which the latter also influenced *Rumu* (Crnjanin 2017). Equally, the pixellated world of *Mars Underground* took inspiration from *EarthBound* (1995) (Rorke 2018). Yet Australian games also draw on local sources. For example, Dan Golding, academic and composer for *Untitled Goose Game*, describes the latter as 'a product not so much of the global video games industry, but rather of a city [Melbourne] that values an interest in culture and industry' (2020, 61). The earlier work of the game's developer, House House, was influenced by Australian locations and designers (Games Talks 2020). *Unpacking* is set in Australia (Witch Beam 2021) and draws on an array of local influences, including puzzles about unboxing and arranging household items in another Australian game, *Florence* (2018) (Ellen 2019). Whereas *Florence* includes references to inner Melbourne, *Unpacking* has a Brisbane developer and refers to Queensland. Quotidian settings in Australian games thus form links between the local and the international.

Australian games are part of an international history of the medium's use of suburban worlds as spaces for exploration and adventure. The term suburb is used here to denote a residential area on the outskirts of a city, a commuter town, or an American-style 'small town' within daily travelling distance of a city (Nicolaidis and Wiese 2006, 9). Significantly, suburbs are not linked to any one country and have long been international, appearing in England in the late eighteenth century and in the United States and Australia in the nineteenth century (Nicolaidis and Wiese 2006, 2; Freestone, Bill, and Simon 2019, 74–76). This article examines games where the central setting is characterized as suburban by an emphasis on houses with yards, verdant residential neighbourhoods, or domestic interiors, appliances and furnishings. Early examples of games with suburban settings are American, such as the arcade game *Paperboy* (1985), the PC simulation game *Little*

Computer People (1985) and the online multiplayer game *Habitat* (1985). Just as the history of suburbs is international, however, suburban settings in games have been shaped by transnational developments.

The transnationalism of suburban settings in games is exemplified by the Japanese role-playing game *Mother 2* (1994), localized for Western markets as *EarthBound*. Set in a version of small-town America named Eagleland, *EarthBound* is transnational in having been developed for the Japanese market and then localized for export; national boundaries are also traversed within the game when the characters travel from Eagleland to other countries. Most strikingly, the game's world is transnational in presenting a heightened, Japanese view of the United States through 'intentionally simple graphics' (Starmen.Net 2007), unnaturally bright colours and fanciful characterizations that convey an outsider's view of small-town American life. Both recognizably alluding to American suburbia and rendering the latter strange, the setting of *EarthBound* is transnational in having different meanings for players in different countries. Whereas an American deems Eagleland a heightened but 'accurate' representation of 'American culture' (Baumann 2016, loc. 648), for players in Australia and other Western countries the game's world is both recognizably American and foreign. Concomitantly, for Japanese players the game's setting is 'a romanticized version of Middle America' that reflects Japanese concerns about 'the troubles of modernity' (Van der Weyer 2015, 169–171). Suburban settings in *EarthBound* and other games are both familiar and foreign, appealing in different ways to players in different countries.

Australian games are part of an international diversification of suburban settings in twenty-first-century games. On the one hand, suburban settings gained prominence in *The Sims* (2000–), the blockbuster life simulation that both centres on American lifestyles (Flanagan 2003; Sihvonen 2011, 135–141) and fosters transnational perspectives by enabling players to customize and modify (mod) the game. Players in various countries use the American 'cybergeography' of *The Sims* 'to reconfigure their lives in a fantasy space' (Dyson 2008, 199), create 'personally relevant' and regionally specific mods (Wirman 2020, 116), and revise 'the spatial mindset' of American suburbia (Sihvonen 2011, 156). On the other hand, the same period saw a diversification of suburban settings in indie games from various countries, such as *Neighbours from Hell* (2003–2004), *Night in the Woods*, *Gone Home* (2013), *House Flipper* (2018), *Omori* (2020) and *The Tenants* (2021). Within this diversification of suburban settings, Australian games contribute decentred perspectives by being indie games, essentially outside the dominance of AAA development, and by originating outside geographic centres of game production in the United States, Japan and Europe. Just as ideas about suburbia are international and manifested in games from many countries, Australian games can be understood in relation to global developments.

Consistent with targeting international markets for indie games, Australian games with suburban settings tend to eschew or de-emphasize geographic specificity, invoking ideas of the local and the universal in more abstract ways. In *Mars Underground*, the town of Phobos has both the insularity of a place that one cannot leave and the universality of a lack of geographic references. The town has houses, a school and shops but is abstracted from existing topographies, the gameworld ending at the town's boundaries. Geographic logic is effaced or 'occluded' (Vanderhoef 2021, 164) when most vehicles travel on the left side of the road but occasionally a car drives unobtrusively on the right-

hand side. Phobos thus typifies Jean Baudrillard's model of postmodern simulation as 'a real without origin or reality', 'a map that precedes the territory' (Baudrillard 1994, 1–2). Equally, *Rumu* and *Roombo* are set in domestic interiors that provide little clue to their location, of which knowledge of the geographic context is not necessary to play the game. In *Rumu*, appeal to international markets can be heard when human characters and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) home assistant speak in American or British voices. Yet any attempt to read these voices as reflecting the game's geographic location is complicated by the fact that these characters are intimidating and foreign for *Rumu*, whose voice consists only of bleeps and for whom the house is a strange and hostile environment. Equally, the subdued music and absence of speech in *Unpacking* offer insulation from the world outside, where recognizing a glimpse of Brisbane's Story Bridge through a window is not essential to experience the game. This reference to the local coexists with the transnational when the game's inclusion of souvenirs from other countries invites players to recognize landmarks as familiar or foreign.

Some games with suburban settings playfully flaunt geographic incongruity and artifice. For example, in *Moving Out* the town of Packmore features a diverse range of residences in implausible proximity. A mountain chalet is within streets of poolside villas, a residential neighbourhood has a crocodile-infested river, and a European-style manor is not far from an American-style orchard, defying any attempt to read the game's world as representing one existing country. Ostensibly the heightened geographic diversity of *Moving Out* contrasts with the setting of *Untitled Goose Game*, in which a 'pseudo-British village' (Golding 2020, 61) is evoked through a plausible arrangement of neat gardens, shops, a canal and a pub. While the subdued colour palette of *Untitled Goose Game* may connote naturalism, however, the game's use of flat colour presents its setting abstractly, like a picture story book, as a representative rather than specific place. Moreover, the game playfully effaces verisimilitude by emphasizing artifice within its world when the goose wanders into a model village that is a miniature representation of the town. The player is thus invited to imagine the entire game as being set in a toy village, which both enables and effaces comparisons to actual places. Through settings that evoke the familiar in hyperreal ways, Australian games participate in an international circulation of ideas about suburban environments.

Suburban exploration and simulated domestic environments

Suburban game settings juxtapose the familiar and foreign by invoking experiences of other types of environments that are linked to exploration. For example, Dennis Jerz argues that many of the 'idioms, metaphor[s] and structures of gaming' were influenced by the topography of caves (Jerz 2015). Just as *EarthBound* positions small towns and caves as equally appealing for exploration, Tanja Sihvonen asserts that suburbia in *The Sims* echoes adventure games' 'inventive mimicry' of cave space (2011, 142). Similarly, suburban spaces in many games are reminiscent of caves or labyrinths. In *Rumu*, the player navigates air conditioning ducts that are configured in a maze-like way. In *Mars Underground*, Mars discovers a hidden passage and other secret channels between locations in Phobos. In *Moving Out* and *Roombo*, homes are labyrinthine obstacle courses that players must explore in order to navigate these worlds.

Suburban settings, like other gameworlds, are thus terrain for a ‘mobilized “virtual” gaze’, which Anne Friedberg defines as ‘an imaginary *flânerie* through an imaginary elsewhere’ (1993, 2). Friedberg links the mobilized virtual gaze to a history of commodified leisure environments that are designed to guide visitors’ movements, and which include shopping arcades, department stores and exhibition halls (1993, 61). For example, she identifies the shopping mall as ‘an architectural analogue’ for the virtual spatial and visual experiences of film and television (1993, 12). Video game settings can also be seen as spatial analogues for other types of places. Derek Burrill asserts that the games arcade shares ‘a long history’ with other environments that involve a mobilized virtual gaze, the arcade’s floor plan guiding players towards machines in a manner similar to shopping malls (Burrill 2008, 61–62). Beyond spatial environments in which games are played, settings within games also invoke the mobilized virtual gaze.

Games with suburban settings offer experiences of virtual travel that juxtapose the familiar and the foreign. Navigating a gameworld is reminiscent of Friedberg’s argument that visiting a shopping mall involves ‘psychic travel’, including attractions that ‘supply alternative vistas’ to everyday life (Friedberg 1993, 112–113). Indeed, gaming can be likened to ‘adventure shopping’, where people gravitate to a mall for ‘stimulation, adventure, and the feeling of being in another world’ (Arnold and Reynolds 2003, 80). The mall provides a model for how simulated domestic environments can signify the familiar and the foreign within and outside games. Exploration of suburban gameworlds is particularly reminiscent of visiting simulated or staged domestic environments, such as furniture showrooms and homes that are open for inspection. For example, IKEA stores offer participatory encounters with simulated living environments that serve as ‘alternative vistas’ to home (Friedberg 1993, 112–113). Affinities with games are evident in Pauline Garvey’s analysis of visiting an IKEA showroom, which involves a ‘maze-like channelling [sic] of people’ through ‘an interactive space’ (2010, 149–151). Just as many gameworlds seem oddly vacated, domestic spaces at IKEA allude to ‘absent presences’ of ‘implied occupants’ (Garvey 2010, 146). Yet the store is also ‘peopled’ by visitors, ‘milling about, touching, testing’ (Garvey 2010, 147) like players exploring a gameworld. While IKEA stores, like games, target international markets, the appeal of inspecting other people’s homes is also evident in local contexts.

Suburban environments in Australian games can be understood partly in relation to practices associated with Australian suburban life. This is exemplified in lifestyles revolving around the home and garden, which Tania Lewis and Fran Martin link to ‘the centrality of home ownership to Australian culture’ (2010, 321). They identify Australian suburban culture of the twenty-first century as transnational through being linked to a Western ‘nation that has embraced an increasingly globalized [sic] lifestyle media’ while being situated at a distance ‘from traditional centres of western media production’ (2010, 321). Moreover, Australian homes and gardens have long drawn influences from abroad, as John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner observe in their seminal earlier analysis of Australian suburban houses (1987, 40). Fiske et al.’s analysis of the Australian ‘ritual activity’ of visiting a display home has striking affinities with IKEA. As in an IKEA showroom, entering a display home resembles an encounter with a gameworld. The home’s entry is described in a way that is similar to a maze, where ‘we are faced with a choice: left, right or straight ahead’; the display home, like a game, is an interactive ‘system’ that enables ‘an infinity of shades of meaning around a common core’ (Fiske, Hodge, and

Turner 1987, 33–34). Australian home and garden culture is echoed in Australian games. For example, the house in *Rumu* resembles a contemporary display home in its minimalist design, muted colours and smart appliances. Homes in *Moving Out* exhibit a range of lifestyles by featuring outdoor entertaining areas and games rooms. Lenny's Mansion, a rock star's residence, resembles an interactive exhibition space in its juxtaposing of musical instruments and trophies with a car turntable and a concealed stairway. By locating adventure in worlds that invoke experiences of other types of simulated domestic environments, Australian games position suburban settings as both familiar and unfamiliar.

Echoing a view that malls and formal gardens are play spaces (Simon 1999, 99–100), video games invite players to explore boundaries of the suburban outdoors. In scholarship about Australian suburban lifestyles, domestic gardens express relationships 'between humans and nature' and use 'physical and symbolic barriers' to enact and display social status (Askew and McGuirk 2004, 20–21). Familiarity with these types of spatial boundaries and practices is evident in *Moving Out* and *Untitled Goose Game* in an emphasis on the absurdity and excesses of suburban outdoor life. In *Moving Out*, property boundaries are both trivial and treacherous when picket fences collapse under sprinting players, while horticultural features can terminally delay a removalist who becomes wedged in shrubbery. In *Untitled Goose Game*, the goose's traversal of hedges, fences and gates serves to ridicule humans' efforts to secure their properties. When human non-player characters (NPCs) display placards indicating that geese are prohibited from their property, humour derives from the apparent expectation that the goose will obey a sign. Instead, the signs prohibiting geese become playable objects that the goose can steal. Similarly, both games require players to interact with kitsch garden ornaments by offering an array of playable objects that includes a fish with legs, a frog with a fishing rod, a miniature windmill, bird baths and wind chimes (in *Untitled Goose Game*) and pink flamingos, play tunnels and garden gnomes (in *Moving Out*). In Australian games, suburban environments and objects are both part of global cultures and echo Australian suburban lifestyles.

Everyday labour and gameplay

Australian games also offer new ways of imagining suburbia, contributing to how this medium enables players to relate differently to the everyday. The significance of how games position suburban environments as play spaces can be understood in relation to the work of Henri Lefebvre. Advocating study of the everyday as an ever-changing 'denominator' of modern life, Lefebvre refutes any notion that the everyday is uninteresting: 'Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why wouldn't the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?' (Lefebvre and Levich 1987, 9–10). Indeed, games commonly juxtapose the banal with the surreal and the extraordinary, such as by investing suburban settings with robots, aliens and the supernatural. By locating fantasy elements in suburbia, games bring a sense of wonder to the banal and invite players to encounter quotidian environments as strange and foreign. *Untitled Goose Game* reveals the surreal in the everyday at the model village, in relation to which the goose seems a giant. In *Rumu* and *Roombo*, robot vacuum cleaners are both futuristic and

quotidian. *Moving Out* combines domesticity with fantasy when players move furniture at haunted houses and space stations and encounter extra-terrestrial rat villains. In *Mars Underground*, the banality of the repeated day is juxtaposed with the fantasmatic in alternative endings in which Mars dies, Mars finds himself in an institution, humans become pets to cat people, and characters travel through space.

Home in Australian games is simultaneously banal, tenuous and surprising. In *Rumu* and *Roombo*, the house both signifies familial order and evokes concerns about security. In *Unpacking*, arranging domestic possessions to create a home is a cherished ritual but also remains open to revision. In *Mars Underground*, the family home is linked to both stability and frustration when Mars wakes in his bedroom every morning to the same day. In *Untitled Goose Game*, home is inseparable from conflict when the goose's interruptions of human lives are revealed to be for the purpose of enabling its own return home. The tenuousness of home in these games can be understood in relation to twenty-first-century life. For example, the recurrent theme of moving house in *Moving Out* and *Unpacking* highlights a ritual that can be understood both as universal and in relation to contemporary housing markets. In particular, the twenty-first century saw a crisis of the longstanding Australian settler culture of home ownership (Lewis and Martin 2010, 321; Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 27) when Australian house prices became some of the most unaffordable worldwide (Worthington 2012, 248). Australia's abrupt shift away from a hitherto presumed right to a suburban lifestyle, to a future of insecure housing, is echoed in themes of domestic transition and disruption in local games.

Australian games with suburban settings suggest ambivalence towards consumer culture, a significant contrast to the emphasis on material acquisition in *The Sims* (Kline et al. 2003, 276; Flanagan 2003, 1) and other architectural and home design games. For example, *Rumu* and *Roombo* present dystopian views of homes equipped with AI appliances. In *Roombo*, the player hacks appliances to exterminate human intruders. In *Rumu*, the main opponent is an appliance, an emotionally demanding AI home assistant named Sabrina who conceals the deaths of the human occupants. Equally, *Moving Out* and *Untitled Goose Game* centre on comical disruptions of consumer culture. Offering experiences that neither *The Sims* nor IKEA provides, *Moving Out* fosters disrespect for property by setting a time limit to move items to the truck. Players learn to save time by jumping through windows, breaking glass and throwing items from upper storeys. Doors are unhinged, ornaments are smashed and paintings fall from walls. In *Untitled Goose Game*, the anthropomorphized character of the goose enables players to imagine themselves as outsiders to bourgeois commodity culture and to take pleasure in frivolous disruption. For example, the goose playfully ridicules human attachments to contrived versions of nature by leading a female resident to confuse her inanimate garden ornament with a living being. When the goose removes a ribbon from the neck of a goose statue and adopts the latter's pose, the woman mistakenly ties the ribbon on the live goose instead of the statue. Destruction and defiance of commodity culture in these games serve to parody suburban lifestyles.

Australian games contribute internationally to games' capacity to reflect on the banality of the everyday and to imagine suburbia in new ways. As Tanja Sihvonen notes, mundane activities in *The Sims* highlight 'the banality of the choices we make in our daily life' (2011, 141). In Australian games, banality forms a counterpoint to the glorification of American suburbia, which is commonly constructed as a 'psychic and emotional

landscape' that is thematically 'loaded' in both its utopian and dystopian variants (Beuka 2004, 4–7). Unlike American suburbia, Australian suburbs have rarely been imbued with grandiose significance, instead often being characterized as 'dull, dreary, unfulfilling, homogenous aesthetic wastelands' (Freestone, Bill, and Simon 2019, 73), and as lacking the 'collectivist aspirations' of the British garden city movement (Butler 2005, 20–21). Contributing to alternative ways of imagining suburbia, banality in Australian games is particularly evident in gameplay involving domestic labour. Deeming *The Sims* 'radical' for foregrounding 'mundane, domestic' lives, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Celia Pearce assert that the game 'answers Bachelard's question: '... how can housework be made into a creative activity?'" (Fullerton, Ford Morie, and Pearce 2008). Whereas banality in *The Sims* is associated with the simulation game's absence of goals, Australian games explore ways of investing domestic labour with excitement and mystery. In *Mars Underground*, Mars must clean toilets to access the power of teleportation. In *Rumu* and *Roombo*, the player must clean floors. In *Roombo* the player receives a score for vacuuming as well as for fighting.

Unpacking imbues an ostensibly banal task with almost ceremonial importance. Like YouTube unboxing videos, this game appeals to a fascination with the 'discovery and revelation' of ordinary objects, positioning 'the act of unboxing as a "happy" event' and foregrounding 'the pleasure of a hitherto mundane act' (Mowlabocus 2020, 567, 571; italics in original). Unlike unboxing videos' fetishization of the new (Mowlabocus 2020, 567), however, *Unpacking* centres on the used possessions of an unknown person. The game thus augments 'discovery and revelation' (Mowlabocus 2020, 567) with recognition of objects that reappear in the game, such as a toy cat, an artist's mannequin and a piggy bank. Through juxtaposing familiar objects with the absence of their owner, who is never seen, *Unpacking* invites players to embrace both the banality of the everyday and the enigma of an unknown person's life. The work of arranging objects in domestic spaces is also revealed to be unexpectedly complicated as the occupant progresses through adulthood and acquires more possessions, whereupon moving in with a new partner introduces the almost insurmountable challenge of accommodating possessions of two people in the same quarters.

Australian games challenge older assumptions that suburbs are 'boring, homogeneous and largely unproductive' in comparison to urban environments (Flew 2012, 233). The twenty-first century has given rise to calls to re-examine the 'imagined geography' of relationships between suburbs and creativity (Flew 2012, 239). Indeed, an Australian study reveals that 'significant' numbers of creative workers are employed in 'outer suburban areas' (Flew 2012, 237). While games do not necessarily represent actual locales or real people's lives, Australian games contribute on a cultural level to creatively re-imagining suburban environments. These games can also fuel shifting ideas about working from home in the era of COVID-19, when Simon Sellars argues for re-examining suburbia and drawing inspiration from creative works that bring fantasy and 'playful surrealism' to quotidian environments (Sellars 2021, 60, 65). These ideas have affinity with the game-worlds of *Unpacking* and *Rumu*, in which homes are also workplaces. In *Unpacking*, the occupant is revealed to be an artist, for whom home is a studio and an office. The game invites players to experience this world as art through its pixellated animation. By imagining suburbia in playful and inventive ways, Australian games contribute to locally and globally shifting ideas about residential environments.

The positioning of domestic labour as gameplay can also confront established ideas about gender. For example, Shira Chess argues that activities of 'cooking, cleaning, and serving' in 'domestic games', such as *Diner Dash* (2003–) and *Cooking Mama* (2006–), target 'feminine audiences' and have a capacity to invoke 'anxieties' about real-life work (2009, 144–146). She thus identifies domestic settings as 'ambivalent spaces' for female players (2009, 146). Yet Mary Flanagan notes that the home also gives rise to subversion through play. For example, *The Sims* forms part of a history of 'doll culture subversion' that includes nineteenth-century 'doll death scene[s]' and funerals (Flanagan 2004, 3–4). Video games' capacity to reflect on anxieties about domestic work is exemplified in *Mars Underground* in the NPC of Mars' mother, a single parent with an ignominious office job. On the one hand, the recurrent significance of Mars' home and the absence of his father can be read to refer to *EarthBound*, which idealizes the player-character's mother and the family home as a safe house. On the other hand, *Mars Underground* departs significantly from *EarthBound* by presenting the domestic environment more ambivalently as reinforcing Mars' mother's oppression. After Mars wins a million dollars to help his mother escape her life of servitude and they leave the town, his actions are found to be futile when the next day commences as 15 March again and they are back home in Phobos.

Games can also playfully explore alternatives to traditional gendering of domestic labour. For example, *Moving Out* positions removal as a boisterous athletic activity for all by enabling players to choose from a range of avatars that includes a woman with or without hijab, a robot warrior, a pirate cat in a wheelchair, a koala, a unicorn and a variety of fish. In *Roombo* the player-character who aggressively attacks intruders has no gendered pronoun, and the ironic reference to the masculine hero of the *Rambo* films is a striking departure from the traditional feminization of housework. By imagining suburban settings in a diverse range of ways, then, Australian games contribute to enabling 'androgynous' game spaces that engage 'all aspects of all persons' (Fullerton, Ford Morie, and Pearce 2008).

In *Rumu*, the vacuum cleaner's infatuation with mundane domesticity defies boundaries of gender and the human. Although this character is referred to initially as 'he' by its inventors, a binary model of gender is refuted as the game progresses. Indeed, *Rumu* displays traits more consistent with conventions of femininity by being programmed to feel only love and to vacuum floors. Stating that 'I love to clean', *Rumu* also professes love for its human inventors, the cat, and other domestic appliances. In contrast to the jealous rages of the AI character of *Sabrina*, *Rumu* embodies an amicable merging of technology and emotions. As well as chatting affably with a toaster and a coffee machine, *Rumu* discerns that an AI laundry hamper is emotionally unstable and declares, 'I love Hamper and will help Hamper'. When *Rumu* logs in to its inventor's computer to obtain an Emotional Stabilization Patch, the game positions the player in an ironic identification with the robot. Along with the absurdity of the idea that a vacuum cleaner might log in to a computer, the game reflects comically on the appliance's emulation of human behaviour when *Rumu* encounters a 'Security Check' screen. To proceed, the player as *Rumu* must tick the box indicating that 'I am not a robot'. *Rumu* thus invites the player to view the everyday differently by encountering the home as an androgynous newcomer, the robot vacuum cleaner

whose desire to be human is linked to a love of domesticity. The banality of quotidian labour is central to re-imagining suburban life in *Rumu*.

Conclusion

Australian video games contribute to an international circulation of ideas about suburban environments. While targeting international markets for indie games, these games are also part of a local industry in which developers draw inspiration from a wide range of sources. Forming part of an international history of games with suburban settings, *Rumu*, *Mars Underground*, *Moving Out*, *Roombo*, *Untitled Goose Game* and *Unpacking* can also be understood in relation to Australian perspectives of suburban lifestyles, quotidian spatial environments and the everyday. These games simultaneously take part in a transnational medium, expand the international scope of Australian screen culture, and participate locally and globally in re-imagining twenty-first-century suburbia. This article contributes to expanding cultural discourse about Australian games by exploring an alternative to a cultural nationalist approach, through positioning suburban settings as a focal point for analysing how locally developed games can be understood on both international and local levels.

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