

Game Narrative Review

=====

Your name (one name, please): Ana Hunter

Your school: University of Southern California

Your email: anahunte@usc.edu

Month/Year you submitted this review: November 2023

=====

Game Title: Venba

Platform: Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows, Xbox Series X and Series S

Genre: Adventure Game

Release Date: July 31, 2023

Developer: Visai Games

Publisher: Visai Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Abhi Shahrin Khan

Overview

Venba's narrative revolves around Tamil parents Venba and Paavalan raising their son Kavin in Canada. They long for him to have a better upbringing than they did in India despite constantly laboring to stay afloat, financially and emotionally. As a result, Kavin develops a cultural ambivalence. From a young age to early adulthood, he has little to no desire to connect with his Tamil culture, which strains his relationship with his parents. Ultimately, before Kavin realizes the significance of embracing his culture, his father passes away, and his mother returns to India. There, he meets her, and they relish the recipes she made for him in his youth.

Characters

- **Venba** – The titular character and maternal figure; she is an educator who was well-liked in India; however, she struggles to teach her Canadian students in ways they enjoy. She

is incredibly loving, and her most apparent love language is food, which she relies on to reveal key moments in the narrative.

- **Paavalan** – husband of Venba and father of Kavin, was a passionate writer in India. Still, after sacrificing his passion to raise his son in Canada, he struggles to find work, which strains the family. He is forced to work at companies that do little for him and show a severe lack of desire to understand him or his culture.
- **Kavin** – the culturally ambivalent son of Venba and Paavalan; thanks to his parents' sacrifices, he becomes a well-educated young man who works in the educational film industry. Only when a conflict revolving around his Tamil culture arises at work does he return to it.

Breakdown

Venba provides players with a false sense of influential choice in the game's structure, which allows the developers to encode cultural influence and meaning through food, dialect, and lived experience. In their encoding, the creators expect players to decode their use of cooking simulation, lack of choice, and narrative structure to display the significance of representation—the “conceptual maps” formed in our heads that give us a sense of how the world functions (Hall).

To understand what will be conceptualized in this argument truly, one must first understand the topic of encoding. Stuart Hall alludes that encoding is a highly coded set of operations producers create (Hall). Though he mentioned this with the intent of talking about other forms of media outside of games, it still applies. Venba's creators have used varying nuances in the game to encode their preferred message and, thus, a way of understanding how their work operates. Suppose the player chooses to note the smaller details encoded in the first few moments; technically, before play begins, the loading screen indicates that food will be an integral part as a pan tosses vegetables on a black screen. Something that players cannot bypass in their gameplay is the distinct dialect use. From terms of endearment to exclamation, certain phrases become expected whether the creators intended them to be understood in Tamil or in English. Immediately before starting the gameplay experience, it is difficult not to notice the music. Often in games today, we lack a soundtrack that relies so heavily on vocals in contrast to instruments. Still, Venba brings that strong vocal soundtrack, using elements of Tamil culture to set the experience for the player. As you are introduced to the character Venba, you also find her garment, a sari/saree, indicates South Asian culture to be prevalent in the gameplay. Though these are not all the nods in the game's grand scheme, the creators were obviously very intentional in their choice to encode.

Given some elements the game developers have placed in the player's view, it is important to now understand the significance of a false sense of choice they gave and its impact on the player's experience. Venba's storyline is inherently linear, yet the creators have put choices in the player's grasp to force the belief that their choice is pivotal to the story or is even didactic. In Antranig Arek Sarian's analysis of Paradox and Pedagogy in the Stanley Parable, Sarian defines didactic choice as an experience where the players are "[compelled] to think as the author wishes them to think [...] that coerces a player to seek out an implied solution" (Sarian 187). When two dialogue options are presented in Venba, they are similar enough to pose the question of whether a distinction matters but are different enough to have players under the impression that one of the choices is incorrect. As the immediate sense of culture is implored through the background music and recipes Venba makes, so is the desire to choose answers that correspond to her character. That desire proves to be an essential element of the player's side of the venture—where they learn to decode. When discussing decoding, Stuart Hall insinuates that just as encoding is a highly coded set of operations, decoding follows suit, except now, the viewers or players are responsible for the deconstruction (Hall).

The bottom line regarding the choice mechanic in dialogue is that though players may feel so attached as to choose an option that most align with their protagonist, it ultimately does not change the fact that the story is linear and will remain unchanged, which is a key aspect of the player's decoding process. Once the realization hits that your choices do not matter in comparison to how the story will progress, it makes the narrative focus far more intensive and forces the player to closely note why the choice remains.

Venba's dialogue can be perceived differently before selecting an answer, yet both equate to the same result. Ironically enough, the lack of choice presented gives players a choice in how they perceive and agree or disagree with actions taken by each character. The lack thereof and the story's outlined structure allow for the harsh realities encoded by the creators to transform an understanding of representation's significance. To expand with an example from gameplay, Venba, in a more direct sense, is a game that uses its narrative structure to have players consider representation outside of the lens of just being someone's ethnic identity but also by the way that we as people look into other's worlds and form our own preconceived notions based off what we think we know. We assume that by Venba and her husband Paavalan staying in Canada to raise their son, Kavin, he will flourish as a result of their efforts to give him a better upbringing than their own, despite them consistently laboring to stay afloat (not just financially, but also emotionally).

Players can choose how Venba responds to Kevin's cultural ambivalence from early childhood to adulthood. In those moments, Venba's responses seem to hold the ability to shift the way Kevin perceives himself and his Tamil culture; in that same vein, players become heartbreakingly aware that the creators did not encode Kevin to experience metamorphosis until the game's end. His ambivalence could be relatable for some, all while infuriating others. In that, the lack of pivotal choice resulting from dialogue options allows players to perceive Kevin in an entirely intended manner—one way or the other. To provide some context for Kevin's reasoning and some decoding that the creators left the players to do, both Paavalan and Venba, throughout the entirety of their appearances in the game, are constantly making efforts to find work that pays well enough to sustain a lifestyle that would suit Kevin. Paavalan, so much so that he takes a job that he despises. With his position at this job, the creators invest a portion of the game towards his struggle and leave one scene for the players to decode.

One night, Paavalan is not home from work at his typical time, and despite Venba getting Kevin to call and find out where he is, no one at the workplace can attest because he keeps to himself. Venba, knowing her husband, heads to the park with Kevin to look. The entire time, there is this looming presence about the scene. Players do not know how we are expecting to find Paavalan, and that expectation only grows worse as Venba spots him, yet the camera does not move from her face. Players, in that instance, must decode using their knowledge of how this world treats people to attempt to understand what happened.

The player finds Paavalan to be wounded, judging by his broken glasses, bloodied face, and personal items strewn about, and can only assume he was the victim of a hate crime. Such details in the scene depict his name on his work badge even being spelled wrong.

This instance also leads to further decoding as the story progresses. One must wonder why Kevin continues to distance himself from his culture. One perception is that judging by his father's treatment for embracing his cultural identity, Kevin realizes that he does not wish to meet the same fate and thus grows further apart from his heritage. Ultimately, no matter what Venba chooses to say to Kevin in any scenario, he has to go through that period of cultural ambivalence—that's something that the creators placed into the narrative as a critical point for the sake of story progression as connectivity occurs between player and character.

It would be entirely remiss to exclude how influential simulation is in Venba's narrative. Representation has a more significant connotation than what is perceived by one's ethnic identity and all that comes with it. As mentioned previously, before we get out of

the first loading screen, it is evident that food will have a prominent role in the game. The simulation of cooking first draws up excitement because, once again, players get to embody that character in Venba and the care she takes when crafting and relearning recipes. David Myers emphasizes in his conceptualization of Simulation that the “distinction between the manner in which the simulation functions and the manner in which the game is played has consequences in the different ways players gain mastery over the simulation and game” (Myers 394). An exciting feat here is that we, as players, know that Venba at its root is a narrative game with a more significant simulation portion, and the prodding question is, how does the simulation aid player mastery in a game that is so narrative-driven? That’s just it. Mastery over Venba is not as direct as getting all the recipes correct the first time through or picking all the correct dialogue options because that does not exist. Instead, mastery in this game is decoding the messages left via the simulated portion.

In Nicole Carpenter’s Polygon review, she boldly claims that the game brings new definition to cooking simulation. She is precisely correct. Food is not just a part of the game or what could be considered the basis; rather, “food is the game” (Carpenter). Making recipes is fun, but the creators encoded such depth with the intent for players to find and define through the choices that they are not truly given.

Yes, players have the chance to embody the character of Venba. Still, they also find that as the story progresses, the cooking mechanic revolves around more than just the food represented in Tamil culture or the urge to prepare each dish in the proper order. The representational quality regarding food’s undeniable overlap with culture is substantial, but its true purpose in Venba is to act as a purifying buffer. The cathartic nature of the simulation in gameplay does not shield what players know of the world’s influence but helps to manage realities that may otherwise go without acknowledgment—like Kevin’s lived experiential conflict that stems from his parents’ backgrounds.

Thematically, immigration and assimilation produce intergenerational conflict between Kevin and his parents—he struggles to recognize and be proud of his identity. With that, he often ignores or lashes out at his parents for trying to have him hold onto his culture. That much is depicted through his relationship with food. Only through preparing recipes, food, and thus the cooking simulation that Venba’s mother passes down to her, which she passes down to Kevin, does he realize a sense of cultural integrity. With this knowledge, it is not just the simulation of cooking that provides remedy but the process undertaken by each character that steps into the kitchen.

The game’s features would not be nearly as influential or prevalent without letting players believe momentarily that their choices matter towards the story’s development.

Duly, the player's choices matter for their own perception of social situations that occur in the game and allow them to recognize their preconceived notions as an agent for a shift in perspective—all while occurring amid a remedial simulation. Venba, at its surface, appears to be another cooking game that just so happens to have a relevant narrative structure. While these attributes are vital contributions, Venba gives players a mistaken sense of compelling choice, allowing the developers to encode cultural meaning through varied avenues like food, dialect, and lived experience. In their encoding, the developers expect players to decode their use of cooking simulation, lack of choice, and narrative structure to display the significance of representation— a construct where “the conceptual maps in our heads [...] allow us to come to a sense of what is going on in the world” (Hall).

Strongest Element

The most vital element in the narrative revolves around the characterization of one moment—the aforementioned scene where Venba and Kavin find Paavalan in the park. The entire game leads up to a breaking point for one of the characters, which happens to be Paavalan. The allure and suspension the creators allowed in the scene by not revealing Paavalan's state and solely relying on Venba's reaction left much to be thought over. Kavin, as a young boy, seeing his father beaten and his items strewn about for no legitimate reason other than his ethnicity being disparaged, which propels the sense of why Kavin is so culturally ambivalent—especially for the following sequences in the game.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element in the game is adding the mechanic of the phone in which Kavin talks to Venba (or truly vice versa. Having seen multiple playthroughs, one thing that was often overlooked was the option to scroll through their past conversations and see how Kavin's character last grew or perhaps devolved since the last time players saw him. If the creators wanted this feature to be prevalent, then it would have been beneficial for more attention to have been drawn towards the ability to scroll through messages.

Highlight

The absolute best moment in the game narrative occurs nearer to the end as the cooking simulation is used one final time before Kevin reunites with his mother in India. As he receives a message from his producer on preparing “Indian” food he decides to embody his culture by trying to create one of the recipes his mother made for him using her recipe book. The game takes the players through this experience as Kevin finally finds himself able to connect.

Critical Reception

Though the overall Metacritic score was 79, a vast majority of the ratings exceed this number. On the lower side with a 70 overall, GameGrin makes it known that they “genuinely loved” Venba but “could not swallow the steep asking price for the short, one-hour experience” (Metacritic). This seemed to be a consensus amongst critics and fans alike—though enjoyable, there is simply not enough content for the game to be as costly as it is. Similarly, Michelle See-Tho with The Nintendo eShop rates Venba a stellar eight out of ten stars, stating that “Venba serves us heartwarming moments that cover the literal and metaphorical distance between Indian and Canadian cultures” despite the runtime being rather short. She also contended that for its short runtime, the game was “easily digestible and informative” (See-Tho). Here, See-Tho’s perspective allots gamers that the short run time may have been a necessary feat in order to make the game more digestible for a larger audience.

Lessons

- Food transcends lifetimes is a powerful lesson that Venba leaves. Supported by Venba using her mother’s recipe book to make memorable dishes for Kevin and then Kevin using the same book to reconnect with his mother and culture.
- Choice afforded is not always a necessity. Supported by the fact that choice has little impact on the narrative if at all.

- Lack of (actual) choice gives players a reason to contemplate why. Supported by the fact that choice at some points, slows down the game, and gives players a moment to digest why that moment was included.

Summation

Venba proved itself to be more than deserving of analysis for its ability to provide connections for many players and establish a sense of representation—even for players who were not of Tamil culture. It delved into the issues of cultural ambivalence and framed sentiments that many children of immigrants experience on a day to day basis. The time skips proved tasteful to the narrative's growth and did not make any one moment feel out of place.