

# “Just like amma used to make”: *Venba* and Packaging the Aesthetics of Diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation aims to demonstrate how *Venba's* (Visai Games 2023) gameplay makes use of authenticity-porn as an affective appeal to its purported target audience. In this, the presentation is a study of the conveyance of the ‘plated’ aesthetic of ‘authenticity’ in a diasporic game like *Venba* through the framework of the appealing and desirable nature of this affective delivery, or ‘authenticity-porn’. The actual ludic mechanics of *Venba*, advertised as a “story about family, love, loss, and more” (*Venba* 2023) have little to do with the emotional message of the game, which is instead rooted in peripheral objects. The processes of gameplay, namely reading and deciphering recipes, cooking, and clicking through dialogue, are rendered background processes in the face of this performance of authenticity.

Diasporic identification in *Venba* functions at the level of set dressing: a popular brand of soap packaging among first-gen Indian immigrant households is centered in a montage; *pottus* line a mother’s mirror; a *Murugan Travels* calendar is visible in each phase of the game’s establishing shot. Marking these material realities as inherently *diasporic*--beyond their classification as inherently Indian, or further, inherently Tamilian--awards them a semiotic weight that is allegedly “only” recognizable to members of the diasporic Tamilian in-group. In dressing the visual environment of the game in this way, *Venba* reassures its in-group players that the story they are playing *belongs* to them, and conversely that they belong to the story. This identification ensures that players attend to this packaged authenticity. The game behind the game is in the recognition of these non-interactable game objects as authenticity markers, developer-winks that they “get it” and are writing, designing, and creating from a place of acceptable and aligned lived experience.

Kempshall (2019, 3), investigating historical sources and player expectations in WWI video games, points to a “desire to recreate the tactile reality of the time period”, which he also refers to as the “accuracy of ephemera”, a desire that tends to and is tended by what this presentation refers to as authenticity-porn. Drawing from this, we posit an understanding of *Venba* and diaspora games in general as being bound to player expectations of accuracy in the depiction of what we term *diasporic ephemera*.

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Similar to the practice of “nostalgia-mining”, diasporic ephemera foregrounds the accuracy of the easter eggs included within the game, which then, in turn, substantiate the credibility of the developers’ marginalized positionalities, and thereby the credibility of the story being told. We aim to highlight the potential for diasporic ephemera to be harmful for both players within the in-group and those outside of it, and discuss examples from other diasporic minority media (*Never Have I Ever*, *The Big Sick*) that mechanize and rely on similarly superficial modes of accuracy. Additionally, we build on Veale’s (2017) discussions of *affective materiality* to explore how and why the staging of authenticity of experience is prioritized and emphasized within the video game experience; by “making what could be experienced as discursive instead experienced as personal”, *Venba* elicits affective self-involvement from the player (p. 655).

In *Venba*, the kitchen, a space of invisibilized and gendered labour, is transformed into a playground of “marketed authenticity” (Wright 2017) via the ‘playing-at’ both the rules of the kitchen and the rules of the game. The game’s message, carried through the medium of this playground, functions through players’ interaction with diasporic ephemera, where perception is weighed as a form of interaction. Player agency is virtually nonexistent given the game’s linear narrative, affording more meaning to the perceptual actions that the player is able to engage in since these are not constrained by the game’s controls. Furthermore, these controls themselves perpetuate this marketed, pre-packaged authenticity in their limitations for the player. The operationalizing affective engagement of the game discourages failure in-game to further uphold the sanctity of the packaged (and plated!) authentic recipe. Recipes that are followed “incorrectly” prompt the player to try again, erasing possible failures and reaffirming the mythos of the perfect Tamil mother; these safeguards against player error reinforce the single game-storied (Rizvi and Mukherjee, 2023) fantasy of cooking, in contrast to the reality of a series of mundane and assumed domestic labors. We pay specific attention to the positioning of resources/ingredients as unlimited and cleaning as an absent task; only some aspects of cooking as a Tamil mother are deemed playable (Waszkiewicz, 2022). The playground has rules; in *Venba*, there is only one way to cook, only one way to be Tamil, only one way to inhabit and fulfill the role of *amma*.

*Venba* is the diaspora as playground, as kitchen, as recipe. This presentation is an investigative reading of the props, practice, packaging and plating of the aesthetics of diasporic experiences in the playful ritual of interactive memorializing via affect and embodiment.

## **Keywords**

diaspora, aesthetics, authenticity, affect, packaging

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