





First add ??? that "creates" water. Then add water itself.

Hmm, what gives out water?

Even the more difficult end-game puzzles are straightforward, but it's hard not to salivate while you're solving them!

Telling the tale of one family's migration from South India to Canada, *Venba* deals with important issues relating to identity, culture, and family. With a narrative built around cooking served up alongside light puzzling mechanics, the game will tease your senses using its storybook graphics, evocative soundtrack, and mouth-watering recipes. But some meals are more Instagrammable than they are satisfying.

WE EAT FIRST WITH OUR EYES

I first came across *Venba* via Twitter, in its early phases. The developers did a great job building up some hype and promising the kind of game which *Venba* more-or-less turns out to be; superficially, at least.

It's certainly an original offering, and the gameplay is pleasingly different too. Far from the frantic pace of games like *Overcooked*, and wisely steering clear of fine-grained management elements, *Venba*'s selling point is a slower, relaxed pace of cooking. The gameplay suits its family home setting rather than a fast-paced professional kitchen.

The first few bites on offer are tantalising appetisers. In terms of its presentation, *Venba* delivers whole-heartedly, which counts for a lot. The rough, block-colour illustrations ▶

KEY INFO

Developer:
Visai Games

Publisher:
Visai Games

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1.4GB



The family dynamic is presented endearingly, with most of the story revolving around interactions between these three characters.



An early stand-out, this idli recipe makes great use of a mechanic that is then unfortunately underused throughout the rest of the game.

are vaguely reminiscent of Friz Freleng's *Pink Panther* cartoons from the sixties; attention to background detail and vibrant dishes contrasts with more muted main characters. Combined with close-ups of delicious ingredients and wide, panning shots to establish plot developments, the overall effect is an assault on your eyes in the best possible way.

Even more so, the wonderfully evocative soundtrack—inspired, in part, by Kollywood film music—is an absolute joy to listen to. Vocals play a more important part here than in many OSTs, which could be distracting if you're a Tamil speaker but, with no voice acting in the game, they certainly help immerse the rest of us in this culture.

These elements set up an accessible storyline that, while it doesn't deviate far from what you'd expect, still has the power to surprise and move with some of its finer detail. Through the eyes of a Tamil mother, it shows a young family struggling to fit in, worrying about finances, food, and prejudice. The story balances its characters precariously above fates borne from a conflict between fitting into a new life and abandoning too much of a previous one. While these themes are universal, the game has understandably struck a chord with Tamil and Indian immigrants, as well as immigrant parents and children.

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LITTLE SUBSTANCE AND FEW ACCOMPANIMENTS

So, initially at least, *Venba* holds much promise. However, it's not long before the game's flaws become apparent.

For one thing, *Venba* is very short. Putting aside the age-old debate about how much game length matters anyway, this game would be considered short even for a short game. A good meal out lasts as long as *Venba* does. In not much more than an hour, you'll

have digested the available dishes, along with the whirlwind story that manages to condense two decades of narrative into its runtime.

I so wanted to enjoy the culinary mechanic on offer. *Venba* does a great job of integrating it into the story, and the sounds of oil hissing and spices sizzling make this a genuinely mouthwatering experience. The depth of the puzzling, however, is the first

sour note. Some of these recipes require the most basic, mundane activity you can imagine: drag a ladle from bowl to pan seven times, click on each of seven dumplings to flip them over, and so on. The slightly-more interesting tasks are few and far between, with too much reliance on basic order of actions and not enough variation with amounts of ingredients, temperatures, etc. Timing isn't even an issue here; there's no attempt to mimic the harms of rushing your rasam or burning your biriyani.

Most disappointing of all is the lack of commitment to anything beyond this core mechanic, the merest morsel to tempt anyone back for seconds. Why can't I replay a specific cooking task? What about the amazing soundtrack; how about letting me get my hands on a version of the ever-present radio to relive these tunes? Unforgivably, as far as I'm concerned, there is no attempt to make the most of the glorious recipes. I cannot be the only one who, assaulted by the sights and sounds of an enticing new dish, felt like having a go at cooking some of them myself. Yet no recipes are provided after the event here, not even in a bog-standard non-interactive version.

This might sound like unfair criticism, but *Venba* prides itself on authenticity and lived experience. Even though its in-game recipes are bound to simplify the real thing, it feels like a missed opportunity to not make more of them. Such a simple addition would extend the multimedia appeal, helping to compensate for shortcomings in the main action.

FAST FOOD

Venba's narrative should be the most substantial part of the game, yet even here there are problems. There are touching moments, plot twists that will definitely bring a tear to the eye of those who identify with them strongest. The dialogue is well-written and the situation is utterly believable. My issues are more with the story's depth: there isn't much more here than you can probably guess at, just based on the game's premise.

The time-skipping allows the story to cover more ground, but it has to do so at such a breakneck pace that there's little time to settle on anything in particular. As the story advances,

it sometimes feels like it's moving too fast to keep up with itself. Certain key events are dealt with so quickly, it's left to the player's mind to fill in the blanks. In a longer game, this might be more acceptable, but with such a short runtime, *Venba's* story feels like it might be missing something.

Culinary-based puzzlers are nothing new, but the addition of an original narrative and an under-represented community go a long way to promising a novel experience. However, I'm sad to say that the goodwill generated by its approachable dev team, wholesome gameplay, and worthy subject matter hasn't quite been fulfilled.

The great shame here is that *Venba* is not without its charm, and it's clear this studio has a lot to offer. Maybe with more time in the oven and less attention spent on garnishing the meal, the end-result would be more satisfying. Ultimately, this dish is for critics to consume, and will leave most regular diners with a lingering hunger. ■



Sadly, the game seems preoccupied with getting both its story and its cooking puzzles over and done with a bit too quickly.