

Eat, Play, Love:
Video Game Food as a Site of Cultural Meaning-Forming
by
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Abstract

Representations of food are becoming more engaging within video games, and, in some games released within the last decade, food is central to the story and gameplay. In this thesis I seek to highlight how this trend is due to both a growing awareness of the role of food in culture and developers exploring new ways of letting players interact with food. Using the framework of play scholar Miguel Sicart, I argue that food is itself playful, and the aspects that make it such allow players to infuse their own meaning into it. This playfulness factor, combined with a rise of games that focus on player's engagement with digital food, means that more than ever players are able to create their own arguments about food within a game space. The manipulation of meaning that is undergone by other physical objects in digital spaces, such as clothing and furniture, and even abstract concepts like race and gender, has been the focus of a plethora of video game scholarship. Food in games has only recently begun to receive this same level of scrutiny, with authors like Michelle Westerlaken and Agata Waszkiewicz analyzing its cultural representations in various modern titles.

As games evolve their methods of representation and gamification, it is important to track how physical objects with deep cultural connotations (such as food) change within them. One way of doing this is through ethnographies: In addition to gameplay analysis I also employ several ethnographic accounts of players developing their own understanding of food within a game's world, along with developer interviews and commentary. This methodology highlights the personal elements of both food and video games that are explored through the act of play.

In this thesis I analyze three different games, each of which presents food in a different context. In my first chapter, I explore how *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* uses food as a survival tool and to encourage creative play. I argue that giving players the freedom to play within a relatively standard cooking system allows for meaning-forming to occur, as is the case with Westerlaken's self-imposed "vegan run" of the game. In my second chapter, I use *Stardew Valley* as an example of how video games can attempt to make political arguments about food through gameplay systems. However, due to the diversity of playstyles, the player is able to develop their own arguments about the values of food. In my third chapter I look at *Venba*, a recent indie title with a central theme about the connection between food and family, to argue that even with relatively little freedom for players to express themselves, food in video games can act as a cultural conversation of meanings between player and developer. I have chosen these three titles both because of the diversity of their presentation of food and because of their visibility within the medium. However, they are in no way a comprehensive look at how food can be used in video games. As I suggest in my conclusion, video games are just one medium through which the role of food in culture is being explored, and we will continue to see innovative representations of food in a growing number of games in the future.

Keywords: Video games, gaming, food, cooking, play, culture.

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Introduction

Visualizing Digital Food

In 2017, the retail giant Walmart showed off a demonstration of a virtual shopping experience at the South by Southwest entertainment festival.¹ Designed by the digital experience company Mutual Mobile, the demo allowed people to “shop” using an Oculus headset and two motion-sensing Touch controllers. In a short recording of the experience posted on Mutual Mobile’s website, the shopper reaches towards items on a shelf with ghostly, translucent hands. By using the triggers on the Touch controller, the player is able to grasp a can of tomato sauce in their virtual hand and view the price, nutrition facts, and even see similar suggested items before tossing it into a cart already filled with several other virtual food objects — all of which would be, in theory, shipped to their home after completing their purchase through a digital storefront. This foray into the metaverse shows the potential for a future where we don’t have to visit the store anymore; where we can do our weekly shopping trip while kicking back on the couch, looking over a hundred varieties of virtual spaghetti sauce. In an age where we have already become considerably detached from our hunter-gatherer roots, the idea of such a basic task as going to the grocery store becoming a fully embodied virtual experience completely blurs the line between our digital and physical selves.

Grocery shopping is not the only food-related interaction that has been adapted to the medium of virtual reality. In the game *Cooking Simulator*, players interact with over 140 ingredients to virtually simulate the preparation of more than 80 different recipes. Mechanics such as realistic physics, the need for precise measurement of ingredients, and visible doneness cues for meat make this simulation decently representational, even with its simplified

¹“Reimagining retail with virtual reality,” Mutual Mobile, accessed 10 Oct. 2023, <https://mutualmobile.com/work/walmart>.

presentation. How much of what is found in *Cooking Simulator* translates to the physical kitchen is questionable – waving one’s hand around to chop vegetables in the game is not likely to translate to the fine motor skills needed to use a real knife – but there are still opportunities for learning about the work that goes into preparing a dish and the ingredients associated with certain recipes. Regardless of its educational value, *Cooking Simulator* presents an opportunity that is similar to the Walmart virtual shopping experience: a chance for people to interact with food, an essential physical element of human life, in a digital space.

The fact that food is at the center of this blurring between digital and physical is noteworthy. Food is a core element of our physical existence, and we interact with it in a multitude of ways. Whether it be as a source of nourishment, a method of gaining capital, or as a cultural touchstone, our relationships with food are deep and complex. As virtual worlds (the most prevalent of which are video games) become more detailed and our ability to interact with them becomes more advanced, we see these relationships mimicked to greater degrees of “realness,” and new opportunities arise for us to develop virtual selves which reflect our physical one. Ian Bogost, writing about the power of representation present in this medium in his essay *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, claims that “video games depict real and imagined systems by creating procedural models of those systems, that is, by imposing sets of rules that create particular possibility spaces for play.”² Games are made up of rules and boundaries created in order to form what Bogost calls a “possibility space,” or an environment where play can take place. These possibility spaces and the play that happens within them can help us to understand the systems or cultural practices that govern our everyday lives. Be it in a virtual grocery store or

² Ian Bogost. “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, edited by Katie Sale (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 122.

in a video game, we are constantly adapting representations of our systems to the digital, creating a wealth of possibility spaces which, when studied rhetorically, can help us to better understand the systems that they are built to represent.

A Quick Note on Games Studies

In this thesis, I am writing about video games as texts. I understand that the current boundaries of textuality have become more welcoming to the idea of the rigorous analysis of video games, but I have still found resistance and speculation at the mention of my treatment of them as such.

Games are texts that can be read in a variety of ways, from their art styles to their music to the literal text displayed on the screen. There is also meaning generated by a player's interaction with a game, the importance of which has been outlined by Bogost.³ With the billions of people who regularly play video games, it has become more than clear that they have become a pillar of human culture. Therefore, it is necessary to study them in order to understand how these art forms impact us, as well as how they can be viewed as reflections on and interpretations of our world.

I believe that last point is the most important one to delve into. We are currently in the process of adapting our lives to the digital. The grocery store, the community center, and even the battlefield now have digital counterparts, many of which are becoming more common to interact with than their real-world inspirations. Questioning who is designing these representations, as well as who they are being designed for, is important in understanding what biases may have been present in their creation, as well as what biases they may propagate. Bogost notes the importance of recognizing this in *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, centering much of his argument about the rhetoric of video games around presenting readings of how different

³ Bogost, "The Rhetoric of Video Games."

games such as *Animal Crossing* and *The McDonald's Video Game* replicate different ideologies and cultural practices, and I will delve more into this point in my second chapter.

Digital technologies blur the boundaries between entertainment and lifestyle. Yet, as my analysis and examples show, video games and other digital spaces are still recognized as other worlds, places of play where we can exercise our imaginations and develop an understanding of our world by being constrained within a digital one. By meaningfully engaging with digital mediums, particularly video games, we are entering a sort of playground where we can interact with concepts within our physical world within new contexts.

A Note on Methodology

Many of the arguments in this thesis will utilize ethnographic evidence and reader responses as forms of evidence. Although a reliance on these methods in the analysis of other texts is traditionally viewed as a weaker tactic, these types of sources are valuable when studying video games, as they reveal ways in which the rhetorics of a game's mechanics are actually understood by its players.⁴ The importance of personal narratives has long been recognized within the field of video game studies. From academic papers such as Waszkiewicz's and other authors such as Adrienne Shaw⁵ and Kishonna L. Gray⁶ to publications such as *Boss Fight Books*, studies of how individuals play and interpret games are not only plentiful, but useful for research like my own. While these narratives do not speak for the experiences of every player, they still help to uncover new ways in which a game's systems can be interpreted.

⁴ Jonathan Quijano, *The Composition of Video Games: Narrative, Aesthetics, Rhetoric and Play*, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 44.

⁵ Adrienne Shaw, "When and Why Representation Matters to Players: Realism versus Escapism," in *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816693153.003.0005>.

⁶ Kishonna L. Gray and Anita Sarkeesian, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

Why Food?

When I tell people that my thesis is focusing on food and video games, one of the most common questions that I have been met with is, “Well, you’ve got to include Pac-Man, right?” My response has changed as the project has evolved, but I’ve ultimately come to agree that yes, this cornerstone of arcade gaming had to find its way into my work somehow.

And how could it not? *Pac-Man*, along with the various spin-offs and sequels it inspired, has one of the most instantly recognizable examples of video game food. As you guide the bright yellow character around the tight corners of each maze-like level, he chomps up the tiny pixels (known as pellets) in front of him, racing to get them all before he is hit by one of the four ghosts that roam the level. After a player consumes around a quarter of the pellets in a level, a fruit appears, granting players extra points for consuming it. Subsequent games in the series, such as *Ms. Pac-Man* and *Pac-Man Plus*, would introduce other edible items like pretzels and pancakes, making food a core concept of the franchise. These foods have become so synonymous with the character of Pac-Man that several of them were included in his move set in the Nintendo fighting game series *Super Smash Bros*.



Figure 1: Cherries are the first fruit to appear in *Pac-Man*.

Food also fits well into the visual language that early arcade games were forced to use to communicate their mechanics to the player. In a room full of game cabinets that a person of any

age could wander up to, arcade games had to be easily understandable. Just like a roll of bandages or a first aid box demarcated with a red cross,⁷ using sprites⁸ of food as health pickups was a skeuomorphic design choice that players could quickly catch on to. Contemporaries of *Pac-Man*, such as *Golden Axe* and *Gauntlet* prompt players to collect roasted meats and other dishes to stay alive. The idea of being rewarded with some sort of nourishment for consuming food is easy to understand for us heterotrophs, and it would quickly become a universal symbol for regenerating health points in countless video games.



Figure 2: A slab of meat in the 1989 Sega arcade game *Golden Axe*.



Figure 3: A similar meat slab in Atari's 1985 arcade game *Gauntlet*.

Pac-Man is a perfect example of how eating becomes intuitive in even relatively abstract games. Even though the protagonist of the game isn't remotely human (compared to those of *Golden Axe* and *Gauntlet*), collecting fruit (which provides additional "nourishment" to Pac-Man in the form of bonus points that eventually add up to an extra life) is still immediately understandable as an objective for the player to complete. The idea of eating was even present in the inception of *Pac-Man*: Toru Iwatani, the game's creator, has stated that in brainstorming how to develop a game that appealed to women (an often overlooked group in gaming, especially in

⁷ Within the two last decades, The Red Cross has informed several game developers that their use of the red cross symbol is in violation of the Geneva Conventions, which state that it is protected under international law (Steven Messner, "How the Prison Architect developers broke the Geneva Conventions," *PC World* [January 16, 2017]), <https://www.pcgamer.com/how-the-prison-architect-developers-broke-the-geneva-conventions/>.

⁸ Sprites are 2D graphical models within a video game.

the early days of arcades), he thought of activities that would engage a female player that were different from the space fights and street brawls seen in many games at the time.⁹ These activities included fashion, fortune telling, and, most importantly for the context of this paper, eating¹⁰ (Iwatani specifically cited his observation that women liked to eat dessert). After deciding to explore how to build a game around the concept of eating, Iwatani stumbled upon an image of a pizza with a slice taken out of it, and the iconic character took shape. Even the name Pac-Man is infused with eating, as its Japanese translation, *Puck-Man*, derives from the Japanese phrase “paku paku,” referencing the sound one’s mouth makes when opening and closing to chew food.¹¹

But beyond its historical inclusion in video games, I believe that there is much more meaning to be found when analyzing food in these spaces. Using Miguel Sicart’s theories on play and playfulness from his book *Play Matters*, I argue that food itself is playful, as are the acts of cooking and eating that are associated with it. Sicart likens play to writing; they are both “a way of being in the world, of making sense of it.”¹² Because of its universality, food is similarly a way of making sense of our world, and a way of discovering what it means to be human. Sicart also writes that play is “a fundamental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy and mature and complete human life,” a description which can easily be applied to the role of food in our lives.¹³ Play is a form of nourishment, an activity that we engage in regularly to feed our humanity, just as we use food as a way to feed our physical bodies.

⁹ Micheal Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 187.

¹⁰ It should be noted that women also enjoy engaging with depictions of fantastical space fights and street brawls, but perceptions of female gamers were (and still are) quite reductive at the time.

¹¹ Newman, 187-188.

¹² Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 25.

¹³ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 13.

In the first chapter of *Play Matters*, Sicart puts forth seven elements that define play.¹⁴ As I apply each of these elements to food, I have modified his definitions to support my argument about the connections between food and play. It should be noted that the definitions are much more distinct in this list than they are in practice. However, I believe that this is a useful framework for understanding what elements of our relationship with food are able to be translated into digital spaces.

Food is *contextual*: The methods with which we gather, prepare, and consume our food vary wildly from person to person. Elements of tradition, societal concepts such as manners, or even our geography can impact our interactions with food. A casserole baked for a family dinner has a much different meaning than one given to someone who has just lost a loved one, just like a dinner shared with a partner in a candlelit dining room carries a much different mood than one shared in front of the television. Even with identical ingredients and methods of preparation, context determines the ideas and emotion that food translates to those eating it.

Food is *carnavalesque*: Using Mikhail Bakhtin's description of carnival, Sicart argues that play is a balance between "creation and destruction," with games creating "a festive liberation in search from freedom, expression, and truth."¹⁵ The marker of this liberation is laughter, which is a momentary reprieve from the restrictions of societal institutions. When viewing food through this lens, the practice of cooking comes to mind. Where recipes provide a structure for this practice, that structure can be subverted or cast aside in favor of creativity and self-expression. A pinch of salt for a soup may turn into several tablespoons worth, or a cup of chocolate chips for cookie dough becomes an entire bag. Of course, there is a balance to this freedom – playing too far outside of the rules of food (which are often governed by our taste buds) results in the ruining

¹⁴ Sicart, 14-25.

¹⁵ Sicart, 18.

of your dish. With too much salt, the soup becomes impossible to choke down, and with too much chocolate the cookies become a gooey mush. Though these end results could still be considered food, they have strayed too far from the boundaries of edibility, tipping the balance more in the favor of destruction rather than creation.

Food is also tied to the carnival itself, particularly when it comes to feasts. Many of our carnivals (or holidays) involve some sort of feast component, complete with rich and sugary foods that one would not ordinarily indulge in. Jewish latkes, Indian gujyas, or even the Dickensian Christmas goose are all hallmarks of times of carnival, dishes which allow us to partake in a sort of dietary liberation. Many of these foods also carry some sort of symbolic or religious meaning, enforcing the idea of contextuality as well.

Food is *appropriative*: Food has the power to imbue the places we consume it in with meaning. Any room can become a dining room, as long as we have demarcated it as a place where meals are regularly consumed. Similarly, food appropriates our kitchens, creating spaces where we must acknowledge certain rules to “play” by. Dangerous tools – knives, skewers, heat sources – are allowed into our homes, and we transform our living spaces in order to accommodate them. Beyond our homes, food appropriates our landscapes, as we dedicate thousands of acres to growing, raising, and processing food. The processes of interacting with food demand that we make space for it, and allow it to appropriate the places we inhabit.

Food is *disruptive*: Just as Sicart writes that play is disruptive because it is appropriative,¹⁶ food is disruptive because of its ability to take over a space. But food is also disruptive because, for us, it is a demand. Our hunger must be satiated, and in order to do so we pause our work. However, engaging in consumption too often can present a risky side of disruption, bringing with it various health issues. Food can also disrupt our status quo through its

¹⁶ Sicart, 22.

effect on our bodies. For those with a lactose intolerance, “playing” with dairy products is a risky practice. Too much milk or yogurt could disrupt the process of digestion, then leading to a disruption of that person’s day. Food allergies are even more disruptive, and tighten the rules of consumption and make it a potentially dangerous act.

Food is *autotelic*: Food has an ultimate purpose for humans: to nourish. We must all eat to survive. However, it is also important to consider the multiplicity of ways in which food is *not* autotelic – i.e., how our interactions with it can vary and add additional purposes. Some people might prioritize the act of eating a meal with loved ones, while others are content to eat in silence in front of a computer screen. One may choose to spend time and money on preparing a dish, while others rely on pre-packaged foods. The ubiquitous nature of food requires that we all engage with it, but the high degree of freedom it presents us with allows us to shape the meaning of that engagement.

Food is *creative*: Cooking and consuming are both ludic acts, allowing participants to explore and gain knowledge through experimentation. For example, an apple can be consumed in a number of ways: It can be sliced, diced, pureed, baked, dehydrated, or eaten whole. Though the end result of eating an apple remains the same, the process used to reach that result can be played with. By creatively engaging with the apple, we learn different things about ourselves (such as what textures we prefer and what methods of preparation are worth our time) and about the world around us (such as what happens to the skin of an apple when it is baked or that the flesh oxidizes when sliced).

Food is *personal*: To quote the late chef and food personality Anthony Bourdain, “food is everything we are. It’s an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It’s inseparable from those from the

get-go.”¹⁷ Though food is a universal need, and is something that defines cultures and societies, our engagement with it is also highly personal. The meaning that we gather from our interactions with food is subject to the influence of culture, but can also be ours to interpret however we wish. We are able to express ourselves through food, and use it as a way of finding our place in the world.

The personal and universal potential that food carries makes it a site of cultural meaning-forming, a language through which we can express some aspect of ourselves and communicate with the world at large. As Roland Barthes writes in his essay “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.”¹⁸ Following the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall (who took inspiration from Barthes in his development of the field of Cultural Studies), Carlos Del Pozo Arana and Ezequiel Miranda Zúñiga apply this idea to the field of gastronomy, using the proliferation of Peruvian cuisine during the 1980s and ’90s as an example of the infusion of cultural identity in food.¹⁹ They write that “gastronomy is doubly articulated with identity. On the one hand, with the physiological, eat to nourish ourselves and not die. On the other hand, eating to know who we are, what our symbols mean and what is the meaning of life.”²⁰ Using this quote, we can understand food as a representation of culture that allows us to communicate with and relate to the world around us – a part of culture that is nearly inescapable.

¹⁷ Kathryn Schulz, “Eat Your Words: Anthony Bourdain on Being Wrong,” *Slate*, May 31, 2010, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/06/eat-your-words-anthony-bourdain-on-being-wrong.html>.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” in *Food and Culture: A Reader* 3rd ed. Edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2012), 23-30.

¹⁹ Carlos Del Pozo Arana and Ezequiel Miranda Zúñiga, “How to Define Gastronomic Identity from Cultural Studies: The Peruvian Case,” *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 27, (March 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2022.100476>.

²⁰ Del Pozo, 2.

When viewed as both a medium of play and representation, food found in video games carries a different cultural weight. At its core, even the most simple of video games is trying to represent something – this is the very nature of the medium. These representations may be aiming for a realistic version of the physical world, or may be more abstract in what they hope to capture, but it is increasingly evident that games are focused on making these representations as engaging as possible. The number of actions that players can perform has risen exponentially (think of how many actions one can take in *Asteroids* compared to *Red Dead Redemption 2*, where you are encouraged to feed, bathe and shave the main character on a regular basis), as has the number of hours that people spend in games like *World of Warcraft* or *Minecraft*. The benefit of this increase in angles of engagement can be seen as capitalistic success – drawing players into your game comes with enormous financial possibilities, as has been the case for titles such as *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Fortnite*, both of which are designed to constantly provide players with new content and in-game purchases. However, it is important to understand what representations players gravitate towards, and what meanings we can glean from how players interact with those representations. Using the framework I have developed to demonstrate food as a method of play, I argue that food is a particularly rich element of representation to study in games. As I will discuss, food can sometimes engage players through the act of survival, encouraging them to further explore a digital landscape in search of sustenance for their avatar. In other cases, food becomes a source of capital, a stand-in for currency, with the objective being to produce, collect, and sell as much as possible. In rare cases, food even becomes the primary representation players interact with in a game. It is here that we truly see how such a tactile and sensory medium can provide and create meaning within a digital environment.

It should be noted that the ability to “play” with food as I am describing it here requires a level of privilege, including the means to have enough food to play with. The supermarket has allowed for a more playful attitude about food to develop in America (especially in the middle and upper classes). Relatively easy access to a surplus of food provides more opportunities for experimentation without the risk of starvation. At the same time, food content has become increasingly popular, especially through the mediums of social media and television. Picture-perfect dishes, trendy new recipes, and an endless amount of cooking shows all encourage consumers with the means to do so to play with their food, to understand it, and to appreciate it for more than just a way of surviving.

In this thesis, I am looking at the ways in which food, a vital part of human culture and survival, is represented in video games. When games choose to represent something that is already both an object of play and a source of cultural meaning-forming, it creates potential for new meaning-forming to occur. To explore this potential, I will analyze three different games, each of which represents food in distinct ways. The first is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, an open-world adventure game which encourages players to explore with intuitive, open-ended gameplay mechanics, including an expansive cooking system. The second is *Stardew Valley*, an independently developed farming/life simulator that argues for the values of community building and eco-consciousness. The third is *Venba*, a puzzle-driven story game that depicts the life of an immigrant Tamil family living in Canada while teaching the player how to prepare simplified versions of Tamil recipes. Each game represents food differently: *Breath of the Wild* shows food as a tool for survival, while also including mechanics that allow for creative and meaningful play. Food in *Stardew Valley* is represented politically; each decision you make with the food you grow will have some ramification on your environment and fellow

townspeople. *Venba*, which is the only game here centered entirely around food, has the most palpable representation of food, allowing the player to embody a character who is trying to connect with their culture through cooking. I believe that studying the representation of food within video games can provide some insight into how we translate such a tangible and mundane language into digital spaces. The amount of attention that cultural theorists like Barthes have devoted to food shows how influential it can be within our societies, much like other cultural objects such as clothing or music. Scrutinizing how these elements of culture preserve meaning or create new opportunities for interpretation when translated into video games can highlight aspects of our relationships with them, and even challenge our understanding of them in the physical world.

Chapter I: Digital Veganism and Creative Play in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*

Just as it was impossible for me to avoid *Pac-Man*, it is quite difficult to pass over a game that has been hailed by many as the “greatest of all time”: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.²¹ The “Zelda” series of games focus on the silent protagonist Link, a hero who is tasked with defeating the evil forces that have corrupted the kingdom of Hyrule and saving its princess, Zelda. Starting with the release of *The Legend of Zelda* in 1986 on the Nintendo Entertainment System, the series has focused on encouraging players to explore their surroundings in order to succeed, which in this case means moving forward in the story. In *The Legend of Zelda*, players are given little information on where to go, and are free to explore the map as they please. Without an external guide, exploring is the only way to progress, as the game’s nine dungeons – sub-areas filled with puzzles and combat challenges culminating in a final boss fight – are scattered around the map, and can be completed in nearly any order. The path to saving the princess is up to the player, making gameplay dynamically challenging.

Breath of the Wild expands upon this freedom in nearly every one of its gameplay elements, an effort which has been praised nearly universally by critics and players alike. With this most recent iteration of Hyrule, players are presented with a much more expansive map filled with different environments, villages, peoples, enemies, and plants. After spending a few hours in a short tutorial area, they are free to wander the world with only one goal: destroy Ganon, the evil demon that has taken over Hyrule Castle, imprisoned princess Zelda, and filled the land with monsters. While it is possible to head straight to Hyrule Castle and complete this task immediately, doing so is a challenge that only extremely experienced players will be able to

²¹ Robert Leedham and Sam White, “The 100 Greatest Video Games of All Time, Ranked by Experts,” *British GQ*, Condé Nast, May 10, 2023, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/best-video-games-all-time>.

accomplish. Because of this, nonlinear exploration is not only encouraged, but required. This is true not only for the world map, but for the game's systems as well.

During a presentation at the 2017 Game Developers Conference, several members of Nintendo's development team for *Breath of the Wild* discussed how they designed the game to cater to multiple playstyles (a presentation like this is a rare occurrence for Nintendo, which has historically been tight-lipped about the development processes of their games). By focusing on the ways that elemental forces could interact with nearly all parts of the game world, they were able to achieve what they called "multiplicative gameplay."²² For example, a strong wind can propel a sailboat forwards, blow items out of an enemy's grasp, or be used to send bombs flying into an enemy encampment. A player's preconceived ideas of how these interactions work in the real world (rain will put out a campfire or fire will spread from grass to a tree) form a base of logic that many of the game's systems operate on, which prompts players to explore just how far these systems go.

This focus on multiplicative gameplay also means that each player's experience is based on their own knowledge, skill, and logic. How each person plays the game will vary based on what method they see fit to achieve their goals. Even though every player will be controlling Link, they will each be imbuing him with different tendencies and behaviors. One player's Link may kill any enemy he sees, while another might not talk to any of the townspeople. It all depends on what actions the player takes and their conscious or unconscious reasoning for each choice they make. Because of this, gameplay itself becomes nonlinear, creating a space for players to develop a virtual, individualistic self. Although *Breath of the Wild* is a game not solely focused on food, using it as an example shows how meaningful food play can happen in a variety

²² GDC, "Breaking Conventions with 'The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild,'" YouTube video, March 10 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyMsF31NdNc>.

of environments. When presented with a possibility space as open as in *Breath of the Wild*, players can create their own representations of systems to explore and interact with.

Food in *Breath of The Wild*

In *Breath of the Wild*, survival is based on food. When Link takes damage because of combat, a long fall, or environmental effects, the player must replenish his health by eating food. The player is almost never far from some source of food in *Breath of the Wild*. In fact, food is so abundant that players can amass a decent amount of it simply by picking up items as they explore. While exploring one of Hyrule's many forests, a player can easily find clusters of mushrooms, trees filled with apples, and several wild animals that drop cuts of meat when killed. The fact that animals drop an already butchered slice of meat when killed is not uncommon in video games,²³ but not being able to recover any other animal products from killing them (such as leather or bone) defines animals such as deer and boar as being purely food sources in *Breath of the Wild*. What species players can kill for food are also defined: for example, dogs, donkeys, and other domestic animals found in the game's towns cannot be killed. In order for an animal to be hunted it must be "wild," while animals in a domestic setting should be seen more as companions. This distinction mirrors many Americans' relationship with meat in the physical world, including the omission of the steps in between killing an animal and a slice of meat appearing before them (such as in a grocery store). Though violent, collecting meat in *Breath of the Wild* is not meant to be gruesome or disturbing, meaning there is less potential for internal conflict in doing so and making it feel more natural to players (although as I will discuss later, some players actively object to any form of hunting).

²³ Collecting meat is a similar process in popular survival games such as *Minecraft* and *Don't Starve*, but usually yields other materials.

With the exception of the wild animals (which require you to engage in some form of combat), collecting food is otherwise simple, as a player needs only to press a button as they run past an item and Link will quickly tuck it into his pouch. The ability to store up to 999 of each raw ingredient means that players should be rarely deterred by a lack of inventory space, giving little reason not to pick up every edible item they find. Certain rarer foods, such as Chillshrooms or the elusive Hearty Radish, have the potential to add some sort of status bonus to a dish when cooked. For example, the item description for a Chillshroom states that it “can be used to cook dishes that allow you to stay cool even in arid regions,” meaning that, when used as an ingredient, it temporarily grants Link with heat resistance, making it less dangerous to traverse Hyrule’s deserts and volcanic areas. Many of these ingredients are often found by chance in areas corresponding with their status effect (Chillshrooms can be found in colder regions). Therefore, as long as the player has been collecting food as they explore and progress through the game, they should be well equipped to sustain and nourish Link.

Players can choose between eating the ingredients they find raw, heating these foods next to a fire source to create cooked versions of them, or combining them and cooking them to create a meal. Cooking meals requires the use of a cooking station, which are scattered throughout the various settlements of Hyrule. These cooking stations mostly appear as pots suspended above a neatly assembled pile of firewood, and sometimes require the player to light them using a fire source. After approaching a lit cooking station, the player can select up to five consumable items from their inventory to hold, and they are then prompted to press a button to “cook.” A short cutscene begins, during which the player watches as Link tosses the ingredients into the pot. A jingle, seemingly made from the percussive sounds of pots and pans, begins to play as the ingredients bounce around the pot. Link shows expressions of curiosity and wonderment as the

cooking progresses, and the player is free to shift the game’s camera to get a better look at his face or the bouncing food. The process culminates with the ingredients disappearing in a puff of white smoke, and Link cheers as the player is presented with whatever dish they have created.

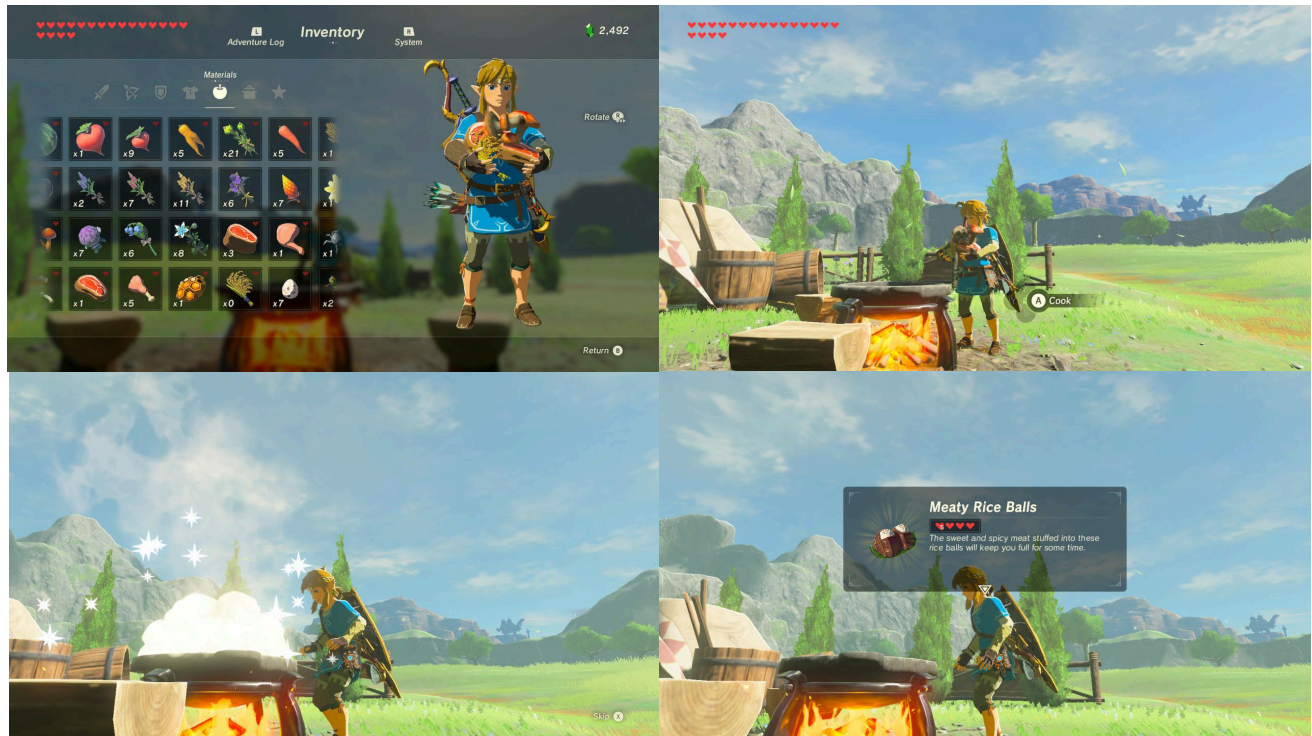


Figure 4: Link gathers ingredients and cooks up a simple meal of Meaty Rice Balls using Prime Meat, Hylian Rice and Hylian Shrooms.

That is, if the dish the player has created is edible. There is no true way to “fail” at cooking in *Breath of the Wild*. Any consumable item can be added to the cooking pot, but consumability does not always correlate with edibility. Mixing objects such as monster parts (such as the fangs or guts obtained from killing enemies) or gemstones in with more traditionally edible items will prompt a different cutscene, where the cheery jingle of pots and pans falls into the sound of breaking glass. Link looks confused and ashamed as the cooking pot lets out a puff of black smoke, and the player is either given “Dubious Food” or “Rock-Hard Food,” depending on what inedible items they have added. Despite the name and appearance of both of these items (Dubious Food is a pixelated green lump, and Rock-Hard Food is a pile of rocks with a small

garnish), Link will consume both of them with only a small amount of hesitation. The only drawback of these “failed” meals is that they grant the same amount of health as eating the ingredients on their own (or even less in the case of Rock-Hard Food), and don’t have the potential to provide any status buffs. There is also the potential humiliation brought on by creating something the description for Dubious Food calls “too gross to even look at,” but the impact of this admonishment will vary based on whether or not the player views this as a failure.

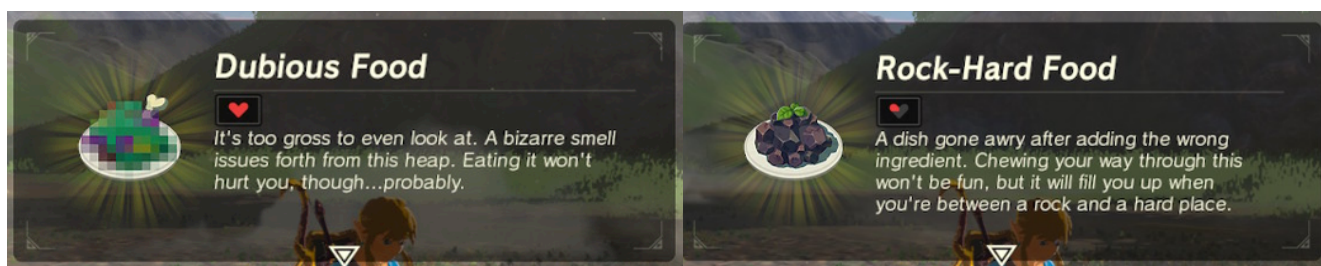


Figure 5: The item descriptions for Dubious and Rock-Hard Food.

As there is no formal introduction to the cooking system – only helpful advice from characters the player may or may not feel inclined to speak with – what causes the result of Dubious Food can be a mystery to some players, making the act of cooking select (and edible) dishes a skill that they can master. Here we see a representation of the carnivalesque nature of food: though there may be much freedom afforded to the player when choosing what ingredients to throw into a pot, there still exist rules which ensure there is a line between creation and destruction. Being too careless with one’s play – not abiding by the learned rules of edibility within the possibility space of the cooking system – leads to destruction and disgust.

Each method of ingestion presents different positives and negatives. When consumed raw, food grants less health than when it has been cooked. Sustaining Link off of raw food is a viable option for when the player is far from a cooking pot or a fire source, if they run out of food in the heat of battle, or if they simply don’t want to engage with the act of cooking. There is

no spoilage or danger of food poisoning in *Breath of the Wild*, meaning this option presents much less risk than in other action-adventure games such as *Fallout 76* or *Ark: Survival Evolved*.²⁴ Eating food placed and cooked next to a fire will grant more health, but can be time consuming, as Link can only hold five items at a time. With this method, there is also the danger that the food being cooked catches fire, causing it to disappear in a puff of ash in seconds. Finding a cooking pot allows players to craft dishes with greater health benefits and even environmental protections and other buffs, but of course the player must possess both the necessary ingredients and the knowledge to create these items.

For the player who may find the cooking system too time consuming or who simply dislikes the process, regaining health is a bit more of a challenge and requires much more time gathering edibles. Although health can be replenished through other means, these methods are more difficult or costly to acquire. Pre-cooked food can also be acquired through quests, but these rewards would likely not suffice the appetite of the average adventurer. Even with the multitude of options available, most players will undoubtedly depend on preparing and cooking their food in order to survive. The disruptiveness of the cooking system makes it not only a central element of the game, but makes an argument about meal preparation being an almost meditative act that requires knowledge of the lands you travel through, the ingredients you collect on your journey, and the basic idea that rocks and teeth are not objects that most people would describe as edible. However, as is the case with real food, disruption is not necessarily a bad thing, but an element that allows us to explore its place in our lives (or in this case, the life of Link). Though engaging with the cooking system is all but necessary, the philosophy of

²⁴ In both of these titles, meat and other perishable foods have timers that count down to when they will become spoiled. Eating spoiled food in *Fallout 76* is particularly dangerous, as it can lead to the player's character acquiring parasites or dysentery, both of which deplete your food and water meters until they are cured either by waiting a certain period of time or by taking antibiotics.

multiplicative gameplay that extends to it makes it possible for that engagement to be both creative and personal.

Becoming Vegan

In their analysis of *Breath of the Wild*, Agata Waszkiewicz writes that the abundance of food available to the player creates a safe space.²⁵ While food is necessary for survival, it is, as previously stated, quite abundant if a player has been picking up the materials they find along their journey. Waszkiewicz's idea of a safe space is similar to my comparison of food as a probability space, but more tailored to their larger arguments about the role of food abundance in "cozy" video games. Waszkiewicz writes that within these safe spaces, players are able to explore and experiment, without having to worry about the real-world issue of resource scarcity. This means that players have the ability to craft their own playstyles, and even have the freedom to create restrictions of their own, thanks to the freedoms afforded by the food system. Some of these restrictions include challenges such as a "no damage" run, where players would never need to eat, or being limited to eating only one type of food, such as apples. Michelle Westerlaken explores one form of this self-imposed restriction in her "vegan-run" of the game, during which she tries to develop what it meant to be vegan in the land of Hyrule. Although Westerlaken doesn't define the specific boundaries she sets for herself, she does include screenshots of discussions she had with others on Reddit about what a vegan run in *Breath of the Wild* might include. These conversations included sexist or anti-vegan remarks and outright objections to her applying real-world beliefs onto a video game, but there were also instances where she was able to communicate with others about her values as a vegan using in-game examples, such as her

²⁵ Agata Waszkiewicz, *Delicious Pixels: Food in Video Games* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022) 76-80.

objection to riding any of the horses found in Hyrule.²⁶ Other users also discussed if the killing of monsters was allowed during a vegan run. One assumption that Westerlaken and her online contributors make is that the default gameplay includes eating meat or killing animals, which is fair when considering how many opportunities the game presents players with to do such things, including an optional quest in the early region of the game that teaches basic cooking skills by requiring you to kill a wild deer or boar.²⁷

Westerlaken describes her in-game actions and the conversations she has about them online as “practicing self-fashioning with my-self (both virtual and actual) through disruption and destabilization of the default gameplay.”²⁸ In other words, she argues that defining in-game veganism requires an understanding of veganism in the real world, and when given the freedom to build on one understanding, players are able to develop the other. Since there are no vegans or mentions of veganism in Hyrule, players who pursue a vegan run must project their own understandings of the practice onto a fictional world. Doing so gives the objects they interact with and the actions they take meanings beyond those provided by the game’s text, giving their play new context. Westerlaken also claims that the creative freedom given to the player in *Breath of the Wild* provides an opportune place for this self-fashioning to occur:

Rather than a small-scale simulation of real life, the gameplay offered me an extra imaginary space that shapes my relation to power in real life. A space where a vegan utopia or a firm political response towards certain vegan ideologies can be imagined, materialized, strategized, and played out. A space where a marginalized voice can embody a protagonist. And a space where the ability to negotiate the rules allows for the

²⁶ Michelle Westerlaken, “Self-Fashioning in Action: Zelda’s Breath of the Wild Vegan Run,” *Philosophy of Games Conference* (Kraków, 2017): 11.

²⁷ This quest is quite helpful in learning the difference between edible and inedible ingredients, but players who don’t fully explore the starting area may not encounter it. In fact, it wasn’t until my third playthrough of the game that I discovered it myself.

²⁸ Westerlaken, “Self-Fashioning in Action,” 4.

development of the self-confidence, courage, firmness, experimental attitude, and certainty involved in making in-game decisions, that would be needed to feel empowered in the real world.²⁹

By creating representations of real-world practices in a relatively safe digital space, Westerlaken is arguing that we are able to explore those concepts in a constructive manner. She writes that “by embodying Link, my-temporary-self, as a vegan, I construct new images and practice familiarity with my personal stances,” illustrating this point further.³⁰

How impactful practicing veganism in a digital space is on one’s real-world convictions is undoubtedly highly variable from player to player. In order to do so, one must recognize each of their actions as meaningful, and a link must be formed between player and character, allowing them to feel fully immersed in the game’s world (and therefore able to apply new contexts to it). Playing a game “disruptively” is not common (unless the game readily provides ways to do so, such as through the use of cheat codes); however, that doesn’t negate the sense of empowerment that Westerlaken describes feeling as she plays. Her account of attempting this challenge shows that virtual spaces (especially those that operate under a relative sense of safety) can provide places for individual meaning-forming to occur, especially when it comes to food. It also suggests the potential for interactions with digital food to influence our interactions with it in the real world, something I will explore more in the next chapter with the more overtly political world of *Stardew Valley*.

²⁹ Westerlaken, 7.

³⁰ Westerlaken, 5

Chapter II: Food, Farming and Community Building in *Stardew Valley*

At its core, *Stardew Valley* is about starting a new life. Tired with the monotony of a corporate workplace, a young adult decides to move out to the rural area of Stardew Valley and take care of a farm that was left to them by their dying grandfather. How much they actually take care of that farm is up to the player, as there is plenty more to do in the world of *Stardew Valley* than planting and harvesting crops. Between completing simple tasks, such as mining and fishing, and working towards long-term goals such as befriending (and even romancing) the inhabitants of the nearby Pelican Town, it is impossible to dedicate more than a few of the 13 and a half minutes each day consists of to any given task without neglecting the others. This means that what activities the player decides to engage in are inherently meaningful. Though many of the tasks are seemingly autotelic (simple actions that help you to grow crops and develop your farm), their context within the themes and overarching narrative of the game make them the opposite. A player's decisions (especially those involving food) therefore become not only personal, but political.

Stardew Valley opens with a cutscene of your grandfather on his deathbed. He hands you a sealed envelope and tells you to wait to open it until a day when you feel crushed by the monotony of everyday life. We then jump forward an unknown number of years to a cutscene of your character at work in a cubicle at the Joja corporation (which sports a logo similar to Amazon's). A camera perched on the cubicle wall watches you as you sit tiredly at the computer, becoming more and more fed up with the corporate lifestyle. Eventually, you reach into your desk and pull out the letter from your grandfather and finally decide to read it. Inside is a note addressed to your player name:

Dear Hunter,

If you're reading this, you must be in dire need of a change.

The same thing happened to me, long ago. I'd lost sight of what mattered most in life... real connections with other people and nature. So I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belong.

The envelope also contains the deed to a farm. It is now up to you to follow in your grandfather's footsteps and start a new life in Stardew Valley. From this opening alone, there is a level of irony that can be recognized in playing a game like *Stardew Valley*. Foregrounding such a strong message about community and nature within a video game, whose medium has long been mocked for removing players from both of those things (think of the stereotype of the basement-dwelling, pale skinned gamer), feels out of place. As I will discuss in this chapter, these ideas are central within both the game's text and gameplay. How effectively they are argued is highly debatable, and depends in part on how the player chooses to engage with it through their gameplay decisions. As with *Breath of the Wild*, players are able to form their own meaning and arguments through *Stardew Valley*'s systems, in some cases countering the narratives intended by the developer.

Before exploring what those narratives are, it is useful to look to *Stardew Valley*'s sole developer in order to better understand who has authored them. Eric Barone, otherwise known by his online pseudonym "ConcernedApe," started developing the game while searching for a job after graduating with a degree in computer science. Over the next four years, Barone would develop every element of the game himself, from creating sprites to composing original music. He enlisted the help of beta testers to try out versions of his game, and conversed with them about what features they wanted to see. Upon its release in 2016, *Stardew Valley* garnered critical

and commercial success, and has sold over 22 million copies to date.³¹ Although this initial success was in part thanks to the help of the indie publishing company Chucklefish, Barone's solitary development process should still be marked as an important aspect of any analysis of *Stardew Valley*. In being the sole creator of a game played by millions of people, Barone acts more as an author rather than a developer. Whereas other big-budget games have large teams of writers, artists, and programmers all contributing their own ideas and viewpoints, *Stardew Valley* presents Barone's views in an uncompromised manner, making it easier to analyze the arguments he is making and the influences that he draws from. We can see an example of this in the salmonberry, an item that players can find growing around the valley. In a 2023 interview, Barone shared that some of the forageable foods (such as salmonberries, blackberries, and grapes) were influenced by the environment surrounding his home in Seattle. As he notes in the interview, many people had never encountered a salmonberry before playing his game, leading to posts on the *Stardew Valley* subreddit about people encountering the fruit for the first time.³² Barone sees the discussions surrounding the salmonberry as a sort of learning opportunity for players, stating that "a lot of people probably learned what a salmonberry is. It makes the Pacific Northwest a bit interesting – people might come here and try a salmonberry."³³ Though it is difficult to say whether or not people were inspired to visit the area after foraging a digital berry, it still provides us with an example of Barone's motivations behind making *Stardew Valley*: that people would take elements of the game with them into the physical world. Further evidence of this can be found in various interviews, where he talks about wanting to create a game that

³¹ Andy Chalk, "Eric Barone says he 'can't believe' Stardew Valley has sold 20 million copies," PC Gamer, Nov. 9, 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/eric-barone-says-he-cant-believe-stardew-valley-has-sold-20-million-copies/>.

³² u/egglort, "Today I learned that salmon berries exist outside of Stardew," Reddit, July 2, 2019, 11:17 a.m. https://www.reddit.com/r/StardewValley/comments/c8izc3/today_i_learned_that_salmon_berries_exist_outside/.

³³ Vivian McCall, "What the Heck Is a Salmonberry?" The Stranger, Index Newspapers LLC, June 19, 2023, <https://www.thestranger.com/food-and-drink/2023/06/19/79043139/what-the-heck-is-a-salmonberry>.

blended real-world messages with engaging gameplay.³⁴ How evenly these two elements are balanced depends largely on the player and how they interpret their actions, as I will discuss later.

Food and Purposeful Gameplay

Stardew Valley was born from the inspiration of *Harvest Moon*, a farming life-sim that was first released on the Super Nintendo in 1996. *Harvest Moon* has since spawned the *Story of Seasons* series, of which each entry has received mixed reviews. Barone cited his disappointment in the series as a reason for developing *Stardew Valley*, stating that he wanted to create a game that combined the atmosphere he loved in *Harvest Moon* with gameplay elements like quests and crafting that gave players more purpose in their actions.³⁵ He also did away with the two-year in-game time restriction that was imposed on farms in *Harvest Moon*, which allowed him to create an environment where players never felt rushed or pressured to complete the myriad of activities the game presents them with.³⁶ The only limitation players face is their character's energy level, which is presented as a stamina bar that depletes throughout the day as you complete different tasks, and can be replenished by eating and sleeping. Even the mechanics of the cooking system were developed to encourage slower, more purposeful gameplay. "There is value to making fried eggs — it heals more of your energy when you eat it — so there's a point to cooking," said Barone. "But it's not to make as much money as possible, because then you'll feel like you have to turn every single ingredient into cooking, which is just more clicking."

³⁴ Jesse Singal, "How a First-time Developer Created Stardew Valley, 2016's Best Game to Date," Vulture, March 14, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/03/first-time-developer-made-stardew-valley.html>.

³⁵ Chris Baker, "The 4 years of self-imposed crunch that went into Stardew Valley," Game Developer, March 8, 2016, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/the-4-years-of-self-imposed-crunch-that-went-into-i-stardew-valley-i-#close-modal>.

³⁶ Singal, "How a First-time Developer."

Cooking is instead a voluntary process, which offers increased health and energy, as well as other potential bonuses. It is easy to make it through the day without needing to eat any food, as your energy levels are replenished with a full night's sleep (provided that you make it to your bed before 12 a.m.). However, if the player wants to complete a lot of arduous tasks such as mining or clearing a forest, food is necessary to keep your energy levels up (just as it is in the real world). Completely depleting your energy brings up a text prompt that reads "You feel sluggish from over-exertion," and your character moves much slower and loses the ability to cast their fishing rod. Continuing to do other tasks leads to your energy levels becoming negative, eventually leading your character to slump over and pass out. Your character wakes up in their bed the next day, losing some gold and starting the day with only a portion of their energy bar replenished, making getting work done that day a challenge.

For the ambitious player who wants to spend their day delving deeper into the mines in search of rare ores or who wants to clear a new plot of land for a chicken coop, the standard amount of energy allotted each day may not be enough to accomplish these tasks while also completing the regular chores that are required to tend to their crops. There are several avenues for replenishing your energy, including visiting the spa or sitting in a bed during a multiplayer play session while your friend completes the day's tasks, but by far the most accessible means is by eating food. Raw food, including the food you grow or the fish you catch, can be consumed, but restore far less energy than preparing them in a dish. One of the earliest encounters with a form of cooking comes as the Field Snack, a craftable item that players learn the recipe for early on in the game. Described as "a quick snack to fuel the hungry forager," it can be crafted from Acorns, Maple Seeds and Pine Cones, all of which the player can gather many of from just chopping down a few trees. Unlike much of the other prepared food in "Stardew Valley," the

Field Snack contains ingredients which cannot be eaten on their own. In fact, besides their use as a seed to plant more trees, these three items aren't used for many other crafting recipes, they don't sell for much gold, and players can amass large quantities of them from simply clearing the land outside of their home. Eating a Field Snack replenishes 45 energy (a sixth of your starting amount), making it an invaluable dish for early in the game. By comparison, a standard parsnip (which is the first crop you learn to grow and one of the cheapest to purchase seeds for), only grants you 25 energy, and sells for 35 gold at Pierre's shop. From this early show of the value of food, players are taught that preparing food is a worthwhile process rather than simply eating the literal fruits of their labor raw.



Figure 6: The crafting recipe for the Field Snack.

Here is where we see one of the first displays of a shift away from an autotelic approach to food. In order to expand your farm, you need a constant source of income to purchase more seeds and the various building upgrades, including a chicken coop and wine cellar. Once it is harvested, food can be eaten, sold, or given away to the townspeople. Which of these actions a player decides to take creates the value of food within their game; eating it makes it nutritionally valuable, selling it makes it capital, and sharing it makes it communal. Most players will likely

partake in all of these actions at some point, but to play *Stardew Valley* “well” requires one to treat food mainly as capital. In order to continue growing their farm and unlock new buildings such as a chicken coop and a greenhouse, the player is encouraged to manage their farm as efficiently as possible in order to maximize profits. Even the act of cooking food has capitalist implications, as it will most likely be used to enable the player to complete more actions in the pursuit of obtaining more capital. This gameplay premise is common in games similar to *Stardew Valley*, such as *Farmville* and *Animal Crossing*. The irony of *Stardew Valley*’s main gameplay loop in the context of its opening cutscene is acknowledged by Sydney Crowley, who argues that “the player leaves the city to escape capitalism, only to run face-first into it in the countryside within five minutes of starting a new game.”³⁷ Crowley also analyzes the friction between Barone’s ecological messaging and what practices (i.e. deforestation, non-regenerative land usage) the player is encouraged to engage in (without penalty) in order to expand their farm, something that I will not go into here but use as another example of Barone’s authorship potentially conflicting with a player’s gameplay choices.

Food and Community

The role of food in connecting with the community in *Stardew Valley* is another area that creates potentially meaningful discrepancies through gameplay. During their first year on the farm, the player discovers the town’s run-down community center, which is being inhabited by forest spirits called Junimos. In exchange for bringing the Junimos certain items such as specialty crops or forageables found in different seasons, you are rewarded with rare seeds and items for your farm. Bringing the Junimos all of the items they request (a task which takes the player at least

³⁷ Sydney Crowley, “Playing Farmer: At the Intersections of Neo-Liberal Capitalism and Ecocriticism in *Stardew Valley*,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 15, no. 1 (March 2023): 26.

one in-game year to finish) leads to them magically restoring the center, which provides several benefits and triggers a cutscene in which the townspeople celebrate the player for their efforts. A similar ending can be reached if the player decides to partner with JojaMart, the big-box grocery store that threatens to put the locally run Pierre’s Shop out of business by offering the townspeople lower prices and giving away coupons. Rather than donating a variety of items, players who take this route must instead pay large sums of money to the “Joja Community Development Form” to unlock similar rewards. Once enough money has been paid (135,000g), the Joja company turns the community center into a warehouse. By making this decision, the player does not miss out on many of the rewards unlocked by supporting the Junimos. If the player is maximizing their farming habits and treating food as purely (or almost entirely) capital, it is easier to acquire the funds for the Joja route than to grow, catch, and forage all of the items the Junimos request. This major decision is one way that the player defines the value of food in their gameplay, as it requires purposeful action and the choice to support your in-game



Figure 7: The interior of Joja Mart compared to the interior of Pierre’s General Store.

community or help capitalistic forces take a stronger hold on a small rural town. If playing with the opening cutscene in mind, players will undoubtedly choose to oust the Jojamart, seeing it as a threat to the town, thus choosing to prioritize food for its communally beneficial value.

Players can also make the choice to treat food as a source of community building through the game's gifting system. Nearly all of the townspeople in *Stardew Valley* have a friendship meter represented by ten red hearts. Friendship levels can primarily be increased by speaking with people each day, completing quests for them, or gifting them an item that they like. Each character has a different hierarchy of items that they prefer, ranging from things they love to things they hate. Gifting a character an item they like or love will grant different amounts of friendship points, and giving gifts that a person dislikes or hates similarly subtracts points. Once a player reaches a certain friendship level with a character, they unlock parts of their individual stories through cutscenes or dialogue options. Some characters are also able to be courted and wed once a high enough friendship level has been reached. With the bulk of the gifts that the majority of the characters like or love being food, this presents players with another opportunity to decide what role food plays in their sense of community. If a player's objective is to marry, they could feasibly optimize their farm to produce a crop that their character of choice prefers and ignore or remain neutral to the rest of the townspeople, or even use their money to purchase large amounts of a food in order to keep it on hand for each gifting cycle. Though friendship nor marriage is not a requirement in *Stardew Valley*, it is a central mechanic, as can be proven by the large amount of story content locked behind it. Much like the choice between siding with Pierre's or JojaMart, the fact that the player is able to decide whether or not they want to engage with the game's main themes means that *Stardew Valley* provides plenty of space for meaning-forming. There is no definitive path to take, so the actions the player takes are done with much more intention. As I show in my next section, there is much more possibility in this space than what Westerlaken experienced in *Breath of the Wild*, and the inherent politicalness of that space makes each action more meaningful.

Roleplaying and Digital Veganism in *Stardew Valley*

Much like *Breath of the Wild*, a concrete example of meaning-forming in action in *Stardew Valley* comes through practicing veganism. In a 2017 post on his blog “the funcrunch files,” Pax Ahimsa Gethen discusses his approach to a creating vegan playstyle, as well as his attitudes towards and interactions with the townspeople.³⁸ Gethen first positions himself as someone who doesn’t have much experience with farming, saying “I’ve tried my hand at real-life gardening, but after three years of volunteer work I concluded that I have neither aptitude for nor enjoyment of this hobby, sadly.” He does, however, find enjoyment in farming in the digital worlds of *Stardew Valley* and similar life-simulation games like *Farmville* and *The Sims*.³⁹ He describes his character in *Stardew Valley* as “a version of (himself),” demonstrating how immersed he is in the game’s world while also pointing towards the idea that he sees his in-game actions as being in line with his real-world motivations. He furthers this connection by naming his character after himself and pursuing a relationship with a townspeople named Elliot, as he “reminded (him) of (his) real-life spouse, Ziggy.”⁴⁰

Gethen’s vegan practices are mainly expressed through his interactions with animals. During his playthrough, he decides to purchase several animals from the town’s livestock provider, but refrains from harvesting any products, such as milk or eggs, from them, instead viewing his farm as a sort of animal sanctuary. In fact, he doesn’t consume any animal products or items containing them, presumably even if they were gifted to him. Gethen is still able to

³⁸ Pax Ahimsa Gethen, “Stardew Valley: Fun and Food for Thought,” the funcrunch files (blog), March 18, 2017, <https://funcrunch.org/blog/2017/03/18/stardew-valley-fun-and-food-for-thought/>.

³⁹ Lee-Ann Sutherland identifies players like Gethen as members of the ‘deskchair countryside,’ which refers to people who mostly experience rural lifestyles through digital activities. (Lee-Ann Sutherland, “Virtualizing the ‘Good Life’: Reworking Narratives of Agrarianism and the Rural Idyll in a Computer Game,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 37, no. 4 [December 1, 2020]: 1156). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10121-w>.

⁴⁰ Gethen, “Stardew Valley.”

interact with other animal-related mechanics, such as husbandry. Rather than avoiding engagement with the mechanic, he finds ways to adapt it to his views. This is similar to his use of the game's fermentation and preserves systems: He details how he amasses a fortune by making wine and jelly from two of the most valuable crops in the game, starfruit and ancient fruit. However, Gethen identifies himself as a "teetotaler." He states he has no moral qualms with producing and selling alcohol, but restricts his in-game self from consuming it, seeing that action as conflicting with his beliefs and practices in the physical world.

In practicing veganism, Gathern also abstains from fishing (which he views as "aquatic hunting"), except for the purpose of fulfilling the several fish bundles in the community center, something that could have been avoided if he prioritized veganism over building community. Gethen offset this by crafting fertilizer out of the extra fish that he didn't need for the bundles, which he justified by noting that this was a common practice for farming crops that even vegans consume. Here we can see another place where players like Gethen who wish to develop a digital self within the game's world must make meaningful choices to contend with the gameplay of *Stardew Valley* and, by extension, the views of Barone. At the request of beta testers, Barone included the ability to harvest meat from farm animals in early versions of *Stardew Valley*. He would remove this feature before release, stating that the violence present in this act "just felt wrong" in the context of the game's mood.⁴¹ Others have pointed out that still including the ability to catch and consume fish conflicts with this statement.⁴² Even though the player does not need to make their character consume animal products, an ideal lifestyle (one that includes living as a pescatarian) is still assumed by its inclusion. An argument could be made (and has been

⁴¹ Singal, "How a First-time Developer."

⁴² Erik van Ooijen, "The Killability of Fish in The Sims 3: Pets and Stardew Valley," *The Computer Games Journal* 7 (2018): 173–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40869-018-0055-x>.

made, both by Crowley and Barone himself)⁴³ that regardless of its violence, the fishing system exists simply because it is a fun and relaxing activity. However, the several articles that I have cited thus far argue that because of the political nature of *Stardew Valley* and Barone's hope to impart real-world lessons upon the player, it is fair to critique discrepancies in the gameplay such as this. In any case, this conflict makes Gethen's gameplay decisions even more meaningful: Rather than simply playing a role, he is actively arguing against the game's assumed viewpoints by altering his playstyle. While Westerlaken was able to create political statements from her experiment in *Breath of the Wild*, Gethen's actions are inherently political, as they are taking place within a system that is already trying to argue for something. The fact that he then backs these actions up by linking them to his physical self cements this. *Stardew Valley* isn't the only game that he reflects his beliefs within: In another blog post, he claims that he has stopped playing other games that are focused on violence in line with his veganism and views on animal rights. The level at which Gethen identifies with his digital characters also shows potential for digital food interactions to in turn have an impact on physical self. If a person's food-related beliefs can be reflected within a digital world in a meaningful way, it makes sense that the inverse would be true as well, meaning that other gameplay practices would have the potential to impact players who are conscious of the decisions they make. Though not all players will choose to play as conscientiously as Gethen, they are still participating in the arguments that Barone makes about food by interacting with the game's various systems. If we use the Salmonberry phenomenon as an example, the possibility of such influence does exist. Proving this would take significant effort, but its potential should still be noted as an area of further research. By starting a new life in the town of Stardew, players may very well have an opportunity to impact their own. However, the ability to develop a playstyle is not present in all food-related games. In my

⁴³ Crowley, "Playing Farmer."

next chapter, I will use *Venba* to discuss what happens when food is given a specific meaning by the developer, but players don't have the freedom to argue against that meaning through play.

Chapter III: Food, Family, and Culture in *Venba*

In Tamil, the word “Venba” refers to a classical form of metered poetry. The game *Venba*, while using poetry as a secondary theme, focuses on a different form of language: cooking. The game's primary developer and writer, Abhi, calls cooking a “language of love,” and sees it as a way for families to cross cultural and language barriers and communicate with one another:

In immigrant families, if the mother and son are literally speaking different languages, food can become the only language that's left between them. To measure or show if something is changing, you need something constant to measure it with. Food fills that role here and using that as a lens to tell this story and show how these characters change in not only their relationships to food but also their relationships to each other felt very fitting for me.⁴⁴

Compared to the other games that I have talked about, food is the most central in *Venba*; in fact, food is the driving narrative force. *Venba* follows the life of its title character as she and her husband immigrate from India to Canada in the late '80s and attempt to raise a son while navigating life in a new culture. Their son Kavin (who, much to the disappointment of his parents, eventually goes by Kevin, the westernized version of his name) has little interest in his cultural heritage. Instead of parotta or dosas for dinner, he wants pizza. He outright rejects several of his mother's attempts to pack him lunch. He often speaks in English around the house,⁴⁵ leaving his Tamil-speaking parents frustrated and unable to fully understand who their son is becoming as he grows up far from his cultural roots.

⁴⁴ Chris Torossian, “Venba Interview: Dev Talks Cooking Games, the Importance of Food and Family, and More,” Game Rant, July 25, 2023, <https://gamerant.com/venba-interview/>.

⁴⁵ English dialogue is represented by text boxes that look stained or cloudy.



Figure 8: Venba and her family prepare to make puttu.

Compared to *Breath of the Wild* and *Stardew Valley*, the time that the average player will spend with *Venba* is marginal. Whereas the first two titles take a minimum of 50 hours to complete (although many will undoubtedly play for much longer, as both games allow you to continue playing even after each of their respective “endings”), *Venba* only takes about an hour and a half, and offers no additional content to engage with once the game’s credits roll. Despite its brief runtime, *Venba* sold over 10,000 copies during its first 10 days on Steam⁴⁶ and was nominated for two awards at the 2023 Game Awards, an event regularly viewed by millions.⁴⁷ Abhi was also inducted into The Game Awards’ 2023 “Future Class,” which highlights 50 developers, artists, streamers and academics who “represent the bright, bold and inclusive future

⁴⁶ These numbers don’t take into account the multiple platforms the game was released on, nor do they account for what Xbox may have paid to acquire the game for their “Game Pass” service. “Venba Sales Soar: Adventure Cooking Game Achieves Impressive Revenue in First Ten Days on Steam,” GameSensor, Aug. 10, 2023, https://gamesensor.info/news/venba_sales_first_ten_days_on_steam.

⁴⁷ *Venba* was nominated for awards in the “Best Debut Indie Game” and “Games for Impact” categories at the 2023 Game Awards. Todd Spangler, “The Game Awards 2023 Nominations: Alan Wake 2, Baldur’s Gate 3 Lead the Pack With Eight Noms Each (Full List),” Variety, Nov. 13 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/gaming/news/game-awards-2023-nominations-alan-wake-baldurs-gate-full-list-1235787390/>.

of video games.”⁴⁸ These milestones have proven that the concept for a short-form cooking story game is not only viable, but has the potential to draw the attention of a wide audience.

“If you can’t smell it, you will hear it!”

Venba’s method of engagement is aided by how artfully it represents the tangible aspects of food.

In developing the game, Abhi stressed the importance of representing each recipe as accurately as possible so that players would “feel like they were stepping inside a Tamil kitchen.”⁴⁹

Members of the development team cooked each of the dishes themselves in order to understand how to translate them to a digital text. This process included focusing on other sensory aspects of the dishes as well: Rather than use existing sound libraries to emulate the ambiance of a kitchen environment, sound designer Neha Patel live tracked herself cooking each of the dishes. Patel shared her philosophy behind this labor-intensive method in a tweet: “When I started on this project, my goal was to make you feel as though you’re entering a South Asian kitchen. The silverware, stainless steel, the bangles, all of it. If you can’t smell it, you will HEAR it!”⁵⁰ This same attention to detail in regards to food is not present in the other two games I have discussed, nor is it common to find in any other food-centric games. Abhi has even stated that he hopes players will learn actual cooking knowledge from *Venba*, saying that the game is about “getting players to think about the steps instead of blindly following directions.”⁵¹ His hope was

⁴⁸ “Meet Our Future Class,” The Game Awards, Accessed February 13, 2023, <https://thegameawards.com/future-class>.

⁴⁹ Nicole Carpenter, “How *Venba* captures the sounds of Tamil cuisine,” Polygon, July 17, 2023, <https://www.polygon.com/23793949/venba-preview-cooking-game-tamil-cuisine>.

⁵⁰ Neha Patel (@Nehapolitan), “VENBA LAUNCHED ...” Twitter, July 31, 2023, 12:30 p.m. <https://twitter.com/Nehapolitan/status/1686051844215472128>.

⁵¹ Lewis Gordon, “Sizzling Dishes and Stressful Meals Give Video Games Warmth,” The New York Times, Nov. 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/22/arts/venba-video-games-food.html?smid=url-share>.

supported by the announcement of a free update to the game that promised to add a cookbook with detailed recipes, helping players recreate each of the dishes in their own kitchens.⁵²

Learning to Cook Again

Venba is organized into seven chapters that span three decades. Each chapter focuses on an impactful moment in the family's life, such as Kavin leaving for college, and the foods associated with those memories. Up until the last two chapters, Venba prepares each dish for her family, trying to recollect how her mother cooked the recipes from the tattered cookbook she brought with her from India. Recipes become puzzles, both for Venba and the player to solve. Using vague clues and dialogue hints, it is up to you to assemble each dish in the correct order, relearning Venba's culture one ingredient at a time.

Our first encounter with Venba happens in 1988, soon after she and her husband have moved to Toronto, Canada. Venba lies on the couch under a blue airline blanket, her husband Paavalan getting ready for work. Paavalan asks Venba how she is feeling, prompting the player's first meaningful interaction with the game. A text box appears above Venba's head, with the choice between her response being that she still feels "tired" or "nauseous" (either answer is later revealed to be a symptom of her yet unknown pregnancy). Regardless of her state, she rises to prepare idlis (small, steamed cakes made from a rice and dal batter that are usually served with chutneys) for Paavalan, who claims incompetence in the kitchen. However, rather than making this simple dish from memory, Venba decides to consult her mother's cookbook for her recipe, saying that hers were always softer, and would cheer her up when she was feeling under the

⁵² Venba, (@venbaGame), "We have some news ..." Twitter, Oct. 26, 2023, 1:08 p.m. <https://twitter.com/venbaGame/status/1717588993842266247>.

weather. After flipping on the radio (which plays a selection of Tamil music created for the game), Venba begins cooking, and the core gameplay begins.

By starting off with the preparation of idlis, *Venba* both teaches the player the game's mechanics using a relatively simple recipe while also showing how even such a small dish



Figure 9: The Idli recipe from Venba's cookbook.

carries a wealth of meaning and memories for Venba. Each cooking segment places you in a first-person perspective, allowing you to control Venba and read her thoughts and memories. This perspective shift creates a closer relationship between player and narrative, giving a sense of embodiment that opens up opportunities for meaningful gameplay. However, compared to *Breath of the Wild* and *Stardew Valley*, this meaning is much less dependent on decisions the player makes. Being a puzzle game means that *Venba* is more procedurally structured than the latter two titles, as players must assemble the ingredients in front of them in a predetermined order or face the penalty of restarting the dish. Restarting isn't exactly classified as failure, however. Completing steps in the improper order results in some dialogue hinting towards what mistakes you might have made, and the ingredients you used are returned to the table, leaving an

untouched surface before you. Though this is an instance of “video game logic” at play, it does speak to one aspect of food as play: there is no way to truly fail.

The challenge of *Venba* comes from decoding the recipes found in Venba’s cookbook. In the case of the idli recipe, the page is torn and stained, obscuring a key step in the process. Subsequent recipes have entire pages of instructions missing, or, in the case of the final chapter in which you embody Kevin, are nearly unreadable due to the Tamil script they were written in. This gameplay premise acts as a way of furthering the embodiment felt by the player by having them experience what it feels like to be disconnected from one’s culture. Venba knows how to make idlis, but the methods informed by generational knowledge are slipping away from her. Tapping into that knowledge is a process of re-learning, and while the player may not have grown up watching their mother make idlis, or have even made them themselves, they still get to experience that process through the eyes of Venba. Through this act of embodiment, *Venba* creates a cultural connotation of food that is not subject to player choice. There is no possibility for a vegan playthrough here; you are being told a story through a Tamil immigrant’s eyes. Like any other text, there is room for interpretation, but there is not the freedom for players to make arguments of their own through the actions they take. The biryani must be properly layered with spices and beef, and the puttlu must be assembled as the diagram depicts it. The one opportunity for creativity comes in the final level, when an adult Kavin (who has stopped going by his anglicized name) and his mother are preparing dosas. The player (who is now embodying Kavin) is able to choose their own toppings for oothappam. Though this choice is relatively inconsequential, it is perhaps one of the most meaningful gameplay interactions that the player has with this text. Kavin is in the process of finding his own way to connect with his cultural heritage, a shift that is symbolized to the player by the ability to customize a dish to their liking.

There are two approaches that players can take in this moment. They can act as they believe Kavin would, staying in the sphere of embodiment by topping the dosa with ingredients that they imagine he would enjoy, or they can disrupt the embodiment experience and use the toppings that they would enjoy. The ability to choose pushes the boundaries of embodiment in *Venba*, making the player a more active participant in the narrative even if their choices have no ramifications on the outcome of the story.

Games can certainly be used for educational purposes, and Abhi even argues that *Venba* should impart some practical knowledge upon the player. However, in the context that I am describing them in, they are less about teaching players a certain skill and more about allowing them to play with certain aspects of their identity. The idea is not that you will learn *how* to cook while playing *Venba*, rather that you will discover *why* you cook. Most of the gameplay possibilities that I have analyzed thus far have been centered around the self-forming that can happen during relatively unbounded play. However, not all games are concerned with players needing to master or manipulate their systems in order to achieve some digital goal. Some games, particularly ones within the narrative genre, function more similarly to film, presenting players with a much more rigid gameplay experience in order to deliver a highly structured story. In the same way that novels allow us to share lived experiences, these games bring players into situations that range from mundane to fantastical, while also allowing them to take a more active role in seeing the story unfold. Though many games in this genre feature gameplay mechanics such as dialogue trees and the ability to make choices that have an impact on the events of the story, their stories are often foregrounded in comparison to their gameplay. What these games often hope to achieve is to provide players with a simulation of sorts – a chance to enter into the world of someone else’s lived experience and play within rigid boundaries. While *Venba* may not

be a true representation of its lead developer's life, Abhi still says that he wanted to represent the experiences of his childhood friends who were born in Canada and had assimilated into Canadian culture, separating them from their parents who had immigrated from India.⁵³ The impact of representing stories similar to that of *Venba*'s has been discussed at length for other forms of media, but the possibility for players to fully immerse themselves in the narrative through carefully detailed representation and clever methods of embodiment elevate the potential of that impact. Evidence for this can be found from a quick glance at the game's reviews on Steam. One user thanks the developer for "creating this moment for [him] to bond with [his] Amma,"⁵⁴ and another commented, "this is such a beautiful game, you don't know how much I cried because it reminded me of my parents and myself. After playing the game, I immediately texted my mom and said I was looking forward to my college break so I could go back home and cook with her."⁵⁵ By exploring the physical and emotional connections food makes within a digital medium, *Venba* shows that food can retain its meaning, even without its physicality.

⁵³ Ramona Leitao, "Recipes for Success: 'Venba,' an Acclaimed Video Game with a Difference, Celebrates the Toronto Immigrant Experience. Here's How Its Creator Cooked It Up," Toronto Star, August 6, 2023, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/toronto-s-tamil-diaspora-is-celebrated-in-new-video-game-on-xbox-playstation-and-more/article_c1e772c1-8bf9-5b7e-91c2-2f84506b80c6.html.

⁵⁴ Merone, "Thank you for creating ..." review of *Venba*, Steam, Aug 4, 2023, 9:59 p.m. accessed February 15, 2024, <https://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198098606419/recommended/1491670/>.

⁵⁵ Quaso, "This is such a beautiful game ..." review of *Venba*, Steam, Aug 5, 2023, 7:51a.m. accessed February 15, 2024, <https://steamcommunity.com/id/suchio/recommended/1491670/>.

Conclusion

As developers begin to give more thought to food in their games, it is gaining much more meaning than a simple health booster. This movement is not only limited to video games, as is noted in the introduction to the 3rd edition of Routledge's *Food and Culture: A Reader*.⁵⁶ Rather, the rapidly evolving nature of food in video games is just one element to study during a rising consciousness of the role of food in culture.

Food also cannot be contained within the game space, as is demonstrated by a glut of YouTube videos and cookbooks showing off how to recreate video game food in your own kitchen. For each of the games I have studied there exists a plethora of extraneous food-related content, both created by fans and by the developers themselves. Popular YouTube cooking channel *Binging With Babish* (famous for recreating dishes from film and television in a humorous and educational manner) has several videos dedicated to making dishes from *Breath of the Wild*⁵⁷ and its sequel *Tears of the Kingdom*.⁵⁸ Brian David Gilbert (formerly of the gaming news website Polygon) challenged himself to cook over 70 of the recipes from *Breath of The Wild*, using ingredients and techniques that would closely resemble those in the game.⁵⁹ Other fans have created blogs and websites with their own versions of recipes from the games, making them more palatable than their simplified in-game representations would be.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ "Once food became a legitimate topic of scholarly research, its novelty, richness, and scope provided limitless grist for the scholarly mill, as food links body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic." Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, *Why Food? Why Culture? Why Now? Introduction to the Third Edition*. In: *Food and Culture: A Reader*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2012), 2.

⁵⁷ Babish Culinary Universe, "Binging with Babish: Zelda - Breath of the Wild," YouTube video, August 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgtpaBOKvrA>.

⁵⁸ Babish Culinary Universe, "Cheesy Meat Bowl from Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom | Arcade with Alvin," YouTube video, August 29, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLDwycmlhsk>.

⁵⁹ Polygon, "We made all 78 Breath of the Wild recipes in one day | Unraveled," YouTube video, July 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYutF8qr7AY>.

⁶⁰ A few of my favorite ones include: "Lvl. 1 Chef," "Sheikah Plate," and "PixelatedProvisions."

Many similar fan-created recipes exist for *Stardew Valley*, including those made by a TikTok user who went by “The Queen of Sauce” (which is the same name as the host of the in-game weekly cooking show).⁶¹ Some of the game’s odder foods, like the Strange Bun, contain fantastical or inedible ingredients, which requires clever substitutions. An official cookbook with Barone as a consultant was recently announced, promising players the ability to “cook and eat all [their] home-grown and fresh-caught ingredients in real life.”⁶² The book’s Amazon listing confirms that it includes a recipe for Strange Buns and Void Mayonnaise, meaning that the mysterious food will have a definitive physical translation.

The desire to cook food from video games in one’s own kitchen is not new. YouTube channels and blogs such as Feast of Fiction and Gourmet Gaming have been documenting their attempts to replicate digital food for well over a decade. Much like the act of cosplay (in which one replicates elements of a game’s world and characters using their own appearance and personality⁶³), these recreations are a form of embodiment. Many of the foods from these games are simplified versions of foods already in our world (such as fish tacos and mushroom risotto), but preparing and consuming them within the context of their respective games makes them mean something new, much like how Venba resonates more with the idli recipe written by her mother rather than the one she had followed countless times before. We want to eat like the characters we play as, to bring a bit of their fantasy into the physical world, turning something that was once only virtually real into something we can touch, taste, and smell. We are embodying the characters we control on the screen, connecting with them over a meal.

⁶¹ Tyler Shipley, “Stardew Valley Fan is Making Game's Recipes in Real Life,” GameRant, October 18, 2021, <https://gamerant.com/stardew-valley-fan-real-life-recipes/>.

⁶² “The Official Stardew Valley Cookbook,” Penguin Random House, accessed March 1, 2024. <https://stardewvalleycookbook.com/>.

⁶³ James Newman. *Playing with Videogames* (London: Routledge, 2008), 83-88.

Recreations of recipes from *Breath of the Wild* and *Stardew Valley* are also appealing because of the level of creativity that has to go into making their simplified dishes palatable. There is a bit of mystery behind a video thumbnail that shows an almost pixel-perfect recreation of a Monster Cake or Lucky Lunch. However, that same mystery does not exist with the recipes from *Venba*. With the preparation of each dish being so closely translated from its source material and the absence of fantastical elements or quirky ingredients, one could easily find tens (if not hundreds) of similar recipes for dosas or idlis online. In fact, someone with the proper tools and ingredients could easily replicate most, if not all, of the dishes after playing through the game. The announcement of the cookbook expansion therefore raises a question: Who is this addition for? Presumably it targets players who are unfamiliar with South Indian cuisine, but



Figure 10: The Idli recipe from the cookbook expansion.

even then, why turn to a video game for recipes that could just as easily be found elsewhere? I believe the answer lies in the embodiment split that I discussed in chapter 3. Players who want to keep engaging with the world of *Venba* can cook the recipes they just played out, giving them new context within their own kitchens. While this act initially begins as a way of continuing the

experience of embodiment from a digital world to the physical one, it soon gains new meaning due to the playful properties of food that I have discussed in the introduction. Doing so not only further connects the player to the characters in the game (through the act of sharing a meal) and takes the sensory immersion presented in game to another level, but allows players to make stories of their own.

Food tells stories; actions can be imbued with histories, smells can carry memories, and tastes can connect us with cultures. However, those connections only exist in the context of a person's lived experiences. A recipe exists as a set of rules to follow, but it is only when a person engages with it that it gains meaning.⁶⁴ Games exist in much the same way, consisting of a set of rules and systems that only gain meaning when the player picks up the controller. Antonelli et al. frames this as a collaboration between player and designer – a game cannot play itself, after all.⁶⁵ At the same time, both of these mediums can be infused with meaning from their inception as chef and food writer Edward Lee acknowledges in his book *Buttermilk Graffiti*: “I cannot eat a dish without wondering who cooked it and what her story is ... There is always more to the story than the ingredients on the cutting board. These stories, I believe, are the building blocks of a new American cuisine, one taking root all over the country.”⁶⁶ There is certainly a similar fascination with the stories of video game developers, especially those who produce work alone or in small groups, as shown by the large number of interviews (several of which I have used as references) with the creators of *Stardew Valley* and *Venba* about their creative process and inspirations. I believe that our interactions with these mediums should be viewed not just as

⁶⁴ Thomas Keller, *The French Laundry Cookbook* (New York, NY: Artisan, 1999), 2-3.

⁶⁵ Paola Antonelli, Paul Galloway and Anna Burkhardt, *Never Alone: Video Games as Interactive Design* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2022), 63.

⁶⁶ Edward Lee, *Buttermilk Graffiti* (New York, NY: Artisan, 2019), 4.

collaborations or history lessons, but as conversations that vary from person to person, player to player.

One way of exploring these conversations is through ethnographies. As shown in the chapter on *Stardew Valley*, the meaning a game intends to put forth is not always the meaning that players take away from it, and ethnographies can help us to identify and understand those discrepancies. Similarly, when it comes to understanding the rhetorics of food culture, personal narratives are powerful resources. The individuality of play and food, especially through their autotelic and personal qualities, means that the only way it can truly be studied is through actual accounts of the activity in question being practiced. During the writing of this thesis, the genre reached popular attention with the release of *Critical Hits*, a collection of essays in which writers and academics describe an aspect of their relationships with video games. *Critical Hits* was featured in an article in the *New York Times*, and was featured on *Esquire's* “Best Books of Fall 2023” list, showing that the subject matter appeals to a wide variety of audiences, not just academics.

The sheer variety of subjects these essays cover show that food is truly only one of many objects we can impart meaning onto while engaging in play. In one essay, an Afghan-American writer reflects on the experience of killing Afghan soldiers in *Call of Duty*, and in another an author discusses her experience growing up as a trans woman playing the *Halo* series. Although virtual food isn't explored in any of the essays, a mention of its impact still appears in the introduction. Here, co-editor Carmen Maria Machado highlights several of her own video game-related memories and talks about the intimacy of sharing such moments with other people. Machado ends by describing how she would use cooking system in *Breath of the Wild* to ground herself during a particularly stressful time in her career:

Sometimes I didn't even do side quests or paraglide over the landscape or fight monsters; I just cooked digital food until I fell asleep. It always got me to the next morning. And then I'd get on a plane and do it all over again ... cooking this thing and that. That little song at the end! The ascending chime. In that memory, I am good at something, and it is a bridge. I can hold it in my hands, move myself through space. It is real and not real. It carries me away, for a little while. It will carry me into a pandemic. (The pandemic has not happened yet, but it is coming.) The memory of the game bears me through the memory of time. But most importantly: I Play. That's the best part. In the memory, I am always playing. (Machado)⁶⁷

Playing connects us to time. Playing connects us to a place. Playing connects us to one another. As we increasingly celebrate the importance of each person's unique experiences with play, we are simultaneously recognizing that the fact that we are having those experiences is a part of what it means to exist as a human. In researching this project, I was surprised by just how much thought is already being applied to food's role in video games, regardless of whether or not the game uses food as a central theme. Experiencing food in a digital world is a relatively new form of play, yet early analysis of it shows that it can be made to be just as meaningful as its physical counterpart. A new wave of food-centric games is also on the horizon: In 2021, two games about soup were announced during the major gaming press conference E3,⁶⁸ and since beginning this thesis there have been at least three games that have released on Steam, each which could have easily had their own chapter in a book-length version of this project.⁶⁹ The impact this trend will have can best be summed up by the words of the foundational food writer M.F.K. Fisher: "And

⁶⁷ Carmen Maria Machado and J. Robert Lennon, ed. *Critical Hits* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2023), xiii-xiv.

⁶⁸ Sean Murray, "Is Soup the Next Genre of Video Games?" *TheGamer*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/soup/>.

⁶⁹ These titles include: *Nour: Play With Your Food*, *Good Pizza*, *Great Pizza*, and *TET*. I highly recommend all of these games, and regret that I could not give them more space than a footnote.

with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably, knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but mainly of ourselves.”⁷⁰ We are all feeding our humanity by eating, playing, and loving. As we create new worlds to play in we will undoubtedly learn more about our own in doing so, just as nourishing digital bodies can help us uncover more about what it means to nourish our own.

⁷⁰ M.F.K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf* (New York: North Point Press, 1988), 200.

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