



# Becoming Émigré through Digital Space: Negotiating Agency and Happiness of Diaspora in *Venba*

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

*Venba* (2023) is a narrative-driven cooking game about an Indian Tamil couple Venba and Paavalan. The game explores themes of migration and identity through food. The recipes are cooked as a form of consolation, celebration, medium to reconnect with their roots or to instil cultural values in their son, Kavin. The paper argues that the disjunctive experience across three levels—the game's narrative structure, puzzle-solving gameplay, and the player's real-world societal context—generates an affective force that unleashes the potential of virtual. The paper will understand happiness as a tool of power that dictates and codifies the behaviour of the characters as migrants with limited agency. The game play of puzzles, allows the player to gain a fluid agency allowing the individual to switch between the ontological experience of agentivity through the game play and their own experience as subjects of a particular socio-political milieu. The disjunctive relation which erupts anew, a-logically among the events, can be seen as "a line-of-flight" (Deleuze) for the player interacting with the game, which induces 'becoming émigré'.

**Keywords:** *Deleuze Studies, Game Studies, Diaspora Studies*

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Émigré or for that matter any displacement from one's socio-political milieu, marked by terms like expatriate or diaspora, puts the individual under a "pre-post"-eros" (p. 62) condition as R. Radhakrishnan (1997) confers, "underwritten by a "here" and "there" (p. xiv). This spatio-temporal displacement leaves the individual hankering for a spatio-temporal coordination from which the émigré is exiled, the 'in' of home and homing remains permanently enshrined and bound in the 'pre' and 'there'; while the new socio-political environ, the real space of expected home and (desired) homing, becomes marked by the 'out', in the 'post' displacement trajectory of the individual that has brought her 'here'. *Venba* (2023) engages with the dilemma of a migrant family, as they struggle in a foreign land to find a footing, over three decades. Abhijeet Shrestha, the designer of the game, explains in an interview that he deliberately wanted to show the struggle of the parents/individuals who arrive with the 'pre-post-eros' condition of being migrant, "they up and leave their country at the age of 40 or 50, and they move to a brand new place. So that sort of makes it super challenging for them" (Ahmed, 2021, para. 3). The game was further designed to be difficult in order to make one experience the trouble that the housewife has to go through in order to cook food. Abhijeet adds later on in the interview "I show how laborious it is through gameplay, because you're putting in the work to make those things. And I thought that's the strength of this medium, so I'm really convinced the story will fit in here really well" (Ahmed, 2021 para. 3). One can further infer from this comment the importance of ontological experiencing of video games that designers deliberately tailor into their games. Further, *Venba* meticulously constructs an immersive and culturally authentic Tamil-Indian experience by integrating aural, visual, and linguistic elements that resonate deeply with Tamil diasporic identity. The game's soundtrack, composed by Alpha Something, is heavily influenced by Tamil film music across various eras, encompassing a diverse range of genres that evoke nostalgia and cultural continuity. The composition features homages to prominent Tamil composers while incorporating poetic Tamil lyrics that reference regional popular culture and storytelling traditions (Something, 2023). The game's art direction is equally evocative, employing richly detailed depictions of South Indian cuisine, from raw ingredients to fully prepared dishes, thus emphasizing the sensory and cultural

significance of food within Tamil households. Further reinforcing this authenticity, the game's domestic space is adorned with ethnically distinctive artifacts, including *kuthu vilakku* (traditional brass lamps), *kolams* (intricate floor designs drawn with rice flour), and posters of Tamil cinema, all of which contribute to a setting that is both aesthetically and culturally accurate (Sarkar, 2023).

The current paper thinking through Mary Flanagan (2009) will understand games as “ordering logic—a machine, or a technology—for creating social relations” (p. 9), where a player engages with the game artifacts as a “striving player” (Nguyen 2020) experiencing a fluid and “layered agency” (Nguyen 2020) shifting between the agential position of a player, winning or at least striving meaningfully to win, to their own socio-cultural position as individuals, enmeshed in various networks of power. C. Thi Nguyen in his book *Games: Agency as Art* describes “layered agency” as the coexistence of multiple levels of agency, where a temporary agency operates within an overarching, enduring agency. This structure allows individuals to immerse themselves in specific activities, i.e., games, while maintaining the capacity to step back and evaluate or cancel those temporary engagements later on. Nguyen (2020) observes:

Striving play involves a complex process of agential layering, where the players create and deploy a temporary agency, nested inside their primary agency, with its own particular ends and modes of practicality.... it's important to think of this as a layered agency, rather than a changed agency, since the temporary agency is still under the justificational thumb of the overall agency. (p. 69)

This layering enables players to experience single-minded immersion while retaining their broader sense of purpose and values, allowing for both engagement and reflection. The game play of *Venba* is constituted by two aspects, the narrative sequence where the player interacts with choices only in order to move the narrative forward, which leads in one way or another to a puzzle like game where the player engages with the game artifacts to prepare the cultural food of the family. Nguyen defines “striving play” as a type of game-playing where the value lies in the struggle rather than the outcome. Striving play involves a motivational inversion, wherein players adopt the game's goal (such as winning) temporarily and for the sake of the experience of striving, rather than caring about achieving the goal for its own sake. It also encourages players to reflect on the activity and its goals. Winning, in this context, is not the ultimate objective but serves as a means to engage fully in the activity. This allows players to evaluate whether the process is worthwhile or beautiful, beyond the success defined within the game's rules. Nguyen states “Striving play encourages us to evaluate our interest in winning in terms that have nothing to do with the value of winning. It asks us to step back from a goal we are pursuing, and to ask questions about the deeper value of the whole activity” (p. 219).

*Venba*, showcases and engages with domesticity; almost all of the game narrative pans out inside the boundaries of the family's home, focusing on the trajectory of the housewife. It is in such games that Flanagan (2009) finds an important source of “subtle yet powerful methods of enculturation occurring via game play and the way in which social values, interaction styles, and everyday activities are both practiced and challenged” (p. 60). The game then allows for the formation of a third axis of understanding agency in the game i.e., agency of the characters in the game, especially the protagonist of the game, *Venba*. In the very first interactive cut-scene of the game, we see *Venba* sleeping, visibly tired, sick and flustered when she wakes up because of the rustling sound that Paavalan's ‘getting ready to leave for work’ makes in the background. She asks him to make some ‘Idlis’ for himself and yet going through the various choices in the narrative brings her (and in turn the player) inevitably to the kitchen to cook the ‘Idlis’. The narrative though sets it up as a labour of love, in spite of all the trouble she has to go through she only manages to reason for the task and not against it, “I need to make lunch for myself anyway” (*Venba*, 2023). Later, when Paavalan further explicates that she need not have gone through so much trouble, *Venba* claims “You're making me choose between resting and letting you starve. That's not a fair choice to me” (*Venba*, 2023). Sara Ahmed in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, explicates how happiness should be understood as a tool of power regulating behaviour, dictating terms of being happy for the self as a making happy of the other. Ahmed (2009) further elaborates the concept of “conditional happiness,” where one person's happiness is made conditional upon another's....the terms of conditionality are unequal: for those who “come first,” their happiness “comes first,” which is how some acquire the right to define the conditions of happiness for others. (p. 133)

The women of the family generally find their happiness staked on the happiness of the other members. In the game we witness the limited agency that *Venba* is granted throughout the game, even though not directly, through the various strings of the narrative we come to witness her struggle to keep her family happy, the task is further complicated by their displaced status as emigrants in a foreign land.

*Venba*'s status as a housewife is further complicated by the reality of her family's location as immigrants. One needs to engage with Sara Ahmed's pivotal question, “What if the world “houses” some bodies more than others, such that some bodies do not experience that world as resistant?” (Ahmed, 2009, p. 12), in the case of a migrant the question becomes inevitable. The migrant's lived experience pushes them in various directions, experiencing resistance be it at home, where they are expected to be a function of authentic culture, or similarly outside the boundaries of home where the expectation is to be an extension of the host(ile) culture. Sara Ahmed (2009) observes, especially in the case of migrants: “Freedom to be happy involves, at least for some, the moral

and emotional labor of becoming unstuck” (p. 138). The next puzzle of preparing food is preceded by a set of interactive cut-scenes where Venba entices, cajoles and convinces Kavin (the born in Canada son of the couple, now a preadolescent) to eat “Puttu”, while he wants to eat Pizza. The onus of getting unstuck, becomes a directive. On one hand for the parents, to be good parents and hence keep the roots intact and deeply engrossed in their son’s psyche, warding off the total corruption of the host culture. On the other hand we encounter a little latter, how Kavin now a grown up teenager, makes it very clear to his mother that he will not take the “Biriyani” that she has cooked and packed for him and his friends, “I (Kavin) don’t want to smell like “Little India” anymore” (Venba, 2023), a getting unstuck from the loop of being ethnic-alien in his normal-native friend group. Sara Ahmed (2009) further reads into the directive technology of happiness in the case of the migrant “For those who are positioned as coming after, happiness means following somebody else’s goods.” (p. 58). The game’s narrative engages with this struggle of the migrant family and the home-maker (even though she teaches in a school as a supply teacher) of the family i.e., Venba.

The shift in the agential position between playing the puzzles and the quick-time-events that the player engages with, illustrates a deliberately disjunctive narrative. This disjunction, in an important sense, can be understood to be the site for the eruption of affective forces, not limited by the meaning-making structure of arboreal schemata. Elena del Río (2008) in her book *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, explicates:

The affective performative unfolds as an interval demarcated by first the cessation, and then the resumption, of narrative. Prior to the affective-performative event, ideology seems to be securely in place, yet certain narrative causes or psychological motivations build a pressure that leads to the moment of performative eruption. (p. 16)

While, Del Río’s book studies the affective forces generated through the performance on the screen, experienced by the viewer through the distal sensorium of sight and vision. I claim that video games bring a unique amalgamation of the distal and proximal sensorium, where the player engages with the game artifact not just at a distance through their aural and visual sensory organs, but also through touch and rhythmic feel, as one clicks, moves around the game controller or the peripheral input device. Play and playing though in this particular context cannot be limited to the definitive and prescriptive nature that it acquires in the definition Ian Bogost specifically and the proceduralist in general profess. Bogost (2007) defines play as the formation of a “possibility space...that refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work” (p. 42), where the meaning of the game is already coded by the game designer into the game. The paper engages with play as a creative, open and discursive process, learning its stance through Flanagan’s (2009) insistence for change in game designers’ attitude, as she suggests they “must work like a virus from within to infect and radically change” (p. 62) how players engage with games. Play then, in this particular instance, should be understood as Miguel Sicart (2011) defines it in his paper titled, *Against Procedurality*:

Play is not only a performance. Play does not only include the logics of the game - it also includes the values of the player. Her politics. Her body. Her social being. Play is a part of her expression, guided through rules, but still free, productive, creative. Without the openness of play, the player cannot express or explore their ethics, their politics. (Against Procedurality section para. 8)

Play then breaks the limitations of being understood as the simple linear engagement of a player with the game artifact to an ontological experience of the play, reintroducing the pivotal role that body plays. Gilles Deleuze has established that the body is no longer a barrier that thought must transcend to attain pure thinking. Instead, it is the medium through which thought must immerse itself to access the unthought. Gilles Deleuze (1989) explicates in his book *Cinema 2*, “Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life” (p. 189). The ontologically experienced dimension of play then allows the scope of the game to move beyond simply evoking the always-already coded structures of emotions and feelings that human expression codifies in linguistic speech acts or performative events retrospectively.

Venba then through ‘open play’, becomes the loci and source of affects. Affects are the result of a simultaneous presence of the actual and virtual that leads one to experience /perceive, if not express the force of becoming. The bodily experience of solving the puzzles which gives the player and the characters in the game a chance at being agential, of feeling a sense of achievement induced by finally being able to prepare that particular cultural food, is abruptly eroded as we move into the next situation. The happiness decoded from the rooted food of culture comes face to face with the challenges of the route again and again in the game. It happens as Venba tries to cajole Kavin to talk to her in Tamil and again as Paavalan is made to stutter and repeat his name properly/ normally as a Canadian would and again as Paavalan is beaten up and mugged on his way back home. All these instances of a migrant family’s negotiation with the host culture are followed or preceded by the conciliatory or celebratory act of preparation of cultural food. In his book *Negotiations*, Gilles Deleuze (1995) presents the concept of “AND” as a space of transition rather than a fixed entity. He argues that “AND” does not belong solely to one side or the other but instead exists in the in-between space, acting as a border that facilitates movement and transformation. This borderline is not always visible because it is subtle, yet it is

along this threshold that significant events unfold—where change occurs, where new possibilities emerge, and where revolutionary shifts take place (pp. 43-46). The player, engaging with *Venba* experiences a disjunctive distribution of agency through the game. The disjunctive experience of the game-play is neither linearly arranged in the narrative, nor a chronologically obvious sequence that the player may predict, but rather erupts alogically i.e., neither logically nor illogically, rather transcending arboreal structure of cultural thought. It is under such a condition of experiencing intensity through the body that Brian Massumi (2002) situates “the conditions of emergence of a subject: an incipient subjectivity....Call it a “self-”. [Where] the hyphen is retained as a reminder that “self” is not a substantive but rather a relation” (p. 14). The relational ‘self-’ can be understood as a condition akin to what Deleuze has defined as Becoming, where subjecthood is a negotiated position in an immanent way, rather than a transcendently ascribed identity. Further it is the “lines of flight” that creates becomings. Deleuze defines the concept in his book written along with Claire Parnet (1987), *Dialogues*:

Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. Nuptials are always against nature. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question—answer, masculine—feminine, man—animal, etc. (p. 2).

It is then, through a negotiatory stance, initiated by the player, while engaging in an open-striving-play through game designer’s viral intuition that a becoming comes forth. A nuptial, against what is generally expected, to be natural.

To conclude, the paper claims that the game brings forth a culturally authentic representation of Indian diaspora and invites the player to engage with a ‘line of flight’ of ‘becoming émigré’ induced through the affective forces engendered by the disjunctive experience of the game. The ““pre-post”-eros’ (Radhakrishnan, 1997, p. 62) experience of a migrant, caught between ‘present and past’, ‘here and there’, ‘now and then’, ‘citizen and alien’, ‘native and ethnic’, is instilled in the “striving player” (Nguyen, 2020) through the affective forces of disjunctively experienced agentivity. Becoming Émigré or for that matter any becoming in the Deleuzian sense is not achieved as a final and stable sense of being immigrant or migrant, or any other being, but rather is negotiated continuously and rigorously in every instance where a striving player, allows the viral strains of the game to affect it in the right way.

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