

# The food in in games like 'Odin Sphere' and 'Dragon's Crown' not only looks delicious but is key to their unique fantasy flavor.

Food Is the Secret Ingredient in Vanillaware's Games



Here's a thing you need to know about *Odin Sphere Leifthrasir*: The quickest route to power in the world of Erion isn't combat. You don't become mighty by slaughtering your foes and harvesting their essence, or shaking them down for mystical trinkets you can staple to your body like pieces of flair. Oh, no. The quickest, surest route to ultimate power?

Apple pie.

Well, or so I thought. Imagine my excitement when I discovered the recipe for vichyssoise, which was even more powerful. "Haha!" I crowed with triumph, gently spooning cold soup into my mouth. "Now none can stand against me!" I was drunk with power or, perhaps, drunk with potato and onion in chicken broth. I've heard tell that there are even mightier recipes out there; *Leifthrasir* is a big game, and it's got a lot of food in it.

Food occupies a weird space in the visual and rhetorical language of video games. Some of the earliest and most iconic games of the 70s and 80s—like *Pac-Man* and *Bubble Bobble*—equated food with bonus points. That tradition finds its hilarious climax in Treasure's manic and hilarious shooter *Bangai-O*, where giant space fruit not only provides bonus points, but also plays a role in the game's plot. (In case you're curious, the most powerful fruit in *Bangai-O* is the pineapple; you have to blow up a lot of stuff to get your hands on pineapples.)



Maury is the lovable, traveling chef in 'Odin Sphere: Leifthrasir.' Image courtesy of Atlus Games

I'm sure when most people who've played mainstream video games think of food, though, they think of its other big rhetorical deployment: portable health. It would take forever to list all the games where eating or drinking something provides some sort of benefit to the player-character's stamina or vitality. Everything from Simon Belmont finding inexplicably placed pot roast in the walls of a vampire's castle, to Mike Haggard literally punching a freshly

prepared turkey out of a 50 gallon drum, to Booker DeWitt dumpster diving his way across a racist American cartoon dystopia.

It's really no surprise that games would use "food" as a stand-in for "health." We fleshly organic beings need nutrients to help keep these meat sacks functioning properly, and for the most part the most efficient and delicious way to get those is to eat stuff. Of course, it might not a good idea to eat cake out of a trash can in the real world, no matter how many gunshot wounds you've sustained, but the idea of food as something that heals and sustains us is sensible.

**"Food is vital, food is important, but it's almost never particularly interesting."**

But just like in our everyday existence, it's easy to take food in games for granted. The presentation of food is often very... basic. *Skyrim*, for example, is [full of random fantasy-epic food](#), the eating of which provides benefits ranging from "heals you" to "lets you carry more/heavier stuff." Actually consuming that food, though... you select it from a menu, and it disappears from that list, and you get your boost. Cooking in *World of Warcraft* involves watching a progress bar tick down. In *The World Ends With You*, food is vital to stat growth, but it's mostly "drag icon onto box, wait for it to be eaten." Food is vital, food is important, but it's almost never particularly interesting.

Enter Vanillaware, the creators of the aforementioned *Odin Sphere: Leifthrasir* (an HD remake of the original *Odin Sphere*), as well as *Muramasa: the Demon Blade* and *Dragon's Crown*.

The hallmark of Vanillaware's games is their rich, beautiful—and in the case of *Dragon's Crown*, **contentious**—art style, with its consistently hand-painted look. One of the lesser-known elements of Vanillaware's oeuvre, though, is their approach to food. Beyond any actual mechanical concerns, Vanillaware presents food like every other visual: lush, detailed, satisfying.





The various things you can eat at the restaurants and stalls in Muramasa's fantasy Japan—like this lobster tempura—look amazing. Image captured by author

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, however, food serves a distinct gameplay role in these titles as well. Take the previous anecdote about *Leifthrasir*. In both the original *Odin Sphere* and the remake—which revamps a few of the original's systems for the sake of simplicity—food does serve as a way to heal, but it's also more than that. Food provides experience points that let you level up. In fact, it's the most efficient and easiest way to increase your level.

Eating three servings of smothered chicken at "Maury's touring restaurant" (operated by a tiny, furry chef with a singletable and big dreams) will get you levels much faster than wailing away on the various denizens of the game's dungeons. In the original *Odin Sphere*, the only way to increase your maximum hit points was to eat; your health points leveled separately from stats like attack power. In *Leifthrasir*, eating always permanently increases your max hit points by a small margin. Food is life... but food is also the ability to crack your enemies over the head with a magical spear so hard they explode into glitter.

There's even diversity in how *Leifthrasir* handles the mechanics of food. You can stop in between-chapter restaurants for exclusive meals, or pick up take out food to eat when you're crawling through the dungeon—though eating in combat is a bad plan since enemies will beat you senseless while you're wolfing down those eggs on toast. You can grow fruit on the fly with seeds, or feed those seeds to a chicken for more powerful meat. Many recipes require veggies, but you need those to make potions with alchemy. The result is an interlocking network of resources that need careful management if you want to get the most out of them.

In my personal opinion, though, the Boris Vallejo inspired, first edition Dungeons and Dragons—like high fantasy of Dragon's Crown takes the (proverbial) cake. Based as it is on D&D, your party's forays into repeated dungeons have the occasional camp interlude. At camp, you... well, eat. Rather, you *cook* and eat; specifically, the various monsters you've killed so far become a pile of ingredients that the players can then drag to cook pots or frying pans, combining and cooking dishes that you then shovel onto your plate and attempt to eat before the 100 second timer is up. Whatever you manage to eat gives you stat boosts for the dungeon to come.



Image courtesy of Atlus

It's a gloriously silly situation, especially if you have multiple human players. You are competing for ingredients and cooking space, and if you're not careful, someone can actually snag your carefully tended pan of stir-fried bat, slap it onto a plate, and scarf it down.

It perfectly captures not just the default game notions of food—restoring health, providing benefits—but also the feeling of being part of a rowdy group of adventurers preparing what might be their last meal, fueling up before diving headfirst into danger once more. It's made all the more powerful by Vanillaware's considerable attention to artistic detail.

I'm actually quite a picky eater in everyday life; there's a good chance you couldn't get me to eat stir-fried bat without a gun to my head and even then, it'd be a challenge. But there is something about the care and detail that Vanillaware puts into the food in their games—not just artistically, but also through the central role it occupies in the universes of these games—that makes me want to try all of it. It's rare to see a studio devote such energy to an element of its games that we normally take entirely for granted and which would normally be considered too simplistic or unimportant to deserve such effort.

It gives these fantastical settings a surprisingly human touch, like they were made by people who actually have eaten something before, who know that cooking and eating have their own pleasures. The best games, to me, weave their aesthetic dimensions fully into the moment-to-moment playing of the game itself. Rather than simply being signposts or decoration, they make art, audio, and animation a fully integrated piece of engaging with how the game functions, not just how it looks and sounds. Vanillaware's exquisite food, which turns a rote visual trope into an experience in and of itself, is an example of just that.