VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action is a visual novel set in the future. You are Jill, a bartender in a small bar who meets eccentric clients and serves them drinks all while listening to their life stories. As a warning, the game does feature alcohol, cigarettes, and mature dialogue not suitable for children.

VA-11 Hall-A does not give the player any choices to make. Or at least that’s what a player starting the game might be led to believe. Instead, all branching dialogue comes in the form of drink-making. Serving a customer a different drink, adding a little alcohol, or making them drinks they didn’t even ask for might lead to different dialogue. Apart from the occasional break from this gameplay, that is all the game has to offer: clicking through dialogue and making a drink for the customer every so often. Yet, as a visual novel, it does not claim to offer anything more than dialogue, and the game shines in its dialogue.

The story of VA-11 Hall-A is incredibly gripping. Characters are given realistic personalities and have stories and problems which leave the player always wanting to know more about these mysterious people and the life they live. With no dialogue options, Jill the bartender has her own personality and talks with the customers, letting the player slowly get to know who this strange bartender is, and the differences between her bartender persona and personal life. The dialogue between Jill and everyone else flows amazingly well from the first moments of the game all the way to the end, never letting the player think for a single moment that this is just a game.

The story’s pacing is perfect or, at the very least, near perfect. The player slowly gets to know Jill, her colleagues and her first few clients, all while getting familiar with the drink system the player will be using for the rest of the game. This gameplay choice to only let the player change the story through drink-making is a very odd one, but pays off: instead of thinking about dialogue options, the player is forced into the world of VA-11 Hall-A by thinking of which drink to make, its ingredients, how to mix it, and more. The player is thinking as the bartender, instead of as a visual novel player. This makes the player incredibly invested in the game, and the game even occasionally rewards that focus with special dialogue if the player can remember customer’s orders.

The music and visuals are nothing to scoff at either. Adding to the already wonderful story and interesting gameplay is great diegetic music and amazing pixel art. The music (being relatively upbeat and going from pop to techno) is sometimes a little odd to hear when the current dialogue is in complete contrast with the music playing, but this almost makes it more realistic as the player is the one choosing the song playing on the jukebox. The pixel art is incredibly well-made, with character models talking during their dialogue and blinking every so often. While there are no animated cutscenes, the game manages without them, the character models and user interface being more than enough to occupy the player’s vision while reading. The game also features gorgeous backgrounds in certain scenes which only add to its charm.

Overall, the game is a wonder to play and read. Its gripping story hooks the player from the beginning, all the way to the end, where they are left wishing the game was longer in order to experience even more characters and well-crafted dialogue. The game itself recommends getting something to drink or eat and to relax while reading and making drinks. With a story which just begs to be read, the music, visuals and gameplay are all beautiful icings on the already delicious cake.