How Characters Blink Their Eyes

Emotion analysis on *VA-11 HALL-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action*

Have you ever felt an attachment to an inanimate character when playing video games? Excellent games can evoke player emotion and connection, and I would like to use *VA-11 HALL-A* as an example to discuss how this happens.

The story of *VA-11 HALL-A* is presented in a cyberpunk dystopia, and players assume the role of a bartender 'Jill' at a small dive bar, responsible for preparing drinks for different characters. What players experience is only Jill's daily routines: working in the bar, chatting with customers, looking through her phone, paying the bills and buying decorations.

The gameplay focuses on preparing drinks according to given instructions, and players' choices don't influence the main storyline. Even though too much storytelling and a small sense of control may ruin the game experience, players find that they feel attached to the characters and engaged in their stories.

VA-11 HALL-A creates emotion and connection through humanized mechanics, and here is how they work.

1. Meaningful Choices

   a) **Core System: Drink Preparation**

   The whole procedure is not challenging for players, encouraging them to pay more attention to the storyline. But I want to highlight some settings associated with players' emotional experiences.

   The gameplay can be separated into 3 stages: receive orders – check instructions – wine mixing.

   In the 1st stage, players should retrace the details in their former chats to confirm the order in some situations. In the 2nd stage, free control of the amount of alcohol in the drink is allowed in some recipes, and excess alcohol intake will cause special reactions and trigger side stories. In the 3rd stage, players can attract or alienate customers by giving them the correct or terrible drinks.

   Wine mixing replaces options in visual novels, emphasizing the presence of the avatar 'Jill' and the connection between her and the other characters. This gameplay induces a phenomenon known as 'para-social interaction', which helps players form powerful attachments to characters.

   b) **Sub System 1: Money**

   Players live in Jill's life, earning money by offering drinks and spending money on items she or the player likes. The most impressive factor in this part of the game is that Jill's needs are consistent with the players' goals: keep the game going and explore various possibilities in this world. This consistency strengthens the player's connection with the avatar, giving a sense of integration and responsibility.

2. Avatar

   a) **Free Will**

   Unlike most avatars appearing in this kind of game, Jill has her own personality and will. She has her own story and feels affection for certain characters. This may prevent the player from engaging in the plot, but in fact, this character plays the dual role of avatar and NPC. Players will involuntarily stand in her shoes, experiencing social connections as they do in reality.

   b) **Life 'Out of Game'**

   The main gameplay in *VA-11 HALL-A* is drink preparing, but it offers an extra scene of Jill's home. Players are free to browse on her phone, decorate her house, and waste time on mini-games. This 'out of game' experience creates a sense of intimacy to Jill the NPC and a sense of control in the role of Jill the avatar.

3. Nonplayer Characters

   a) **Bad Tastes**

   The characters themselves are somehow idealized, but the players' connections to the characters are made by chats, usually meaningless and of bad taste. This mirrors the way in which we interact with people around us, which is called a 'grounded situation'. Since this kind of conversation is grounded in experience, we will regard similar ones created by media to be credible.