

# Functions of Fantasy: An Analysis of VA-11

## Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action

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### Abstract

With the development of technology, humans are living with increasingly diverse media. These media receive critique for their negative effects on human society, especially for their distortion of reality that leads people to blur the line between reality and fantasy. However, fantasy has irreplaceable significance for social progress, which is often ignored. This essay states that fantasy embodies philosophical theories, leads humans to reflect on the current situation, and depicts possible scenarios of cultural and technological singularities, if not the future. To illustrate these functions, this essay takes VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action (hereinafter referred to as VA-11 Hall-A, pronounced as “Valhalla”) as an example of fantasy to analyze its genre, content, and aesthetics, followed by a discussion of the future of fantasy. Finally, the essay will discuss the limitations of VA-11 Hall-A in terms of its reflection on the reality and vision for the future.

# VA-11 Hall-A: A Bar in Glitch City

VA-11 Hall-A is a visual novel released in 2016 by Sukeban Games, a game studio based in Venezuela. The story happens in Glitch City, a dystopian city where residents struggle to maintain their lives with little money and a shortage of supplies. Jill, the protagonist controlled by the player, is a bartender at a bar labeled as VA-11 Hall-A by the city's government. Her everyday tasks are mixing drinks, serving drinks, and chatting with customers. At the end of each day, Jill goes back home and browses news on her phone. She lives alone with a cat, and she loves shopping at JC Elton's, a store in her neighborhood.

## Glitches

Glitches occur in Glitch City, like errors in an error trying to break the erroneous system. Jill, the protagonist of the visual novel, is of no doubt one of the glitches. An example to support her “glitch identity” is that she gave up an opportunity to work at a big research facility and decided to be a bartender. This is interesting because working as a researcher is in many ways much better than working as a bartender. However, if recall that Glitch City is controlled by a mega company profiting from experimental technologies, it becomes easier to understand her motivation. If Jill works as a researcher, she would directly or indirectly work for the mega-corporation. As an individual, refusing to work at a research facility is her fiercest resistance to capitalism, and mixing drinks for customers is the best she can do to escape from the dystopian reality. Same for her customers: buying a drink at VA-11 Hall-A is their luxurious time away from the hassles in their lives.

Jill serves drinks to various customers including humans, cyborgs, Lilims (autonomous humanoid robots), corgis with advanced intelligence, an intelligent brain in a jar, and so on. Most customers more or less deviate from the "default human" in reality: they vary in terms of species, genders, sexual orientations, creeds, and intelligence. These characters contribute to the image of an anti-anthropocentric world and question the definition of humanity, just like glitches challenging a system. For instance, corgis coming to VA-11 Hall-A own and run the Seifar Toy Company, which produces toys for canines. They might appear alienated to players because they are no longer pets of humans but autonomous subjects, and their intelligence mismatch with their non-human bodies. Lilims, though driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), look more natural because they have humanoid appearances and make human-like actions. Lilims' consciousness will be stored in the "Collective Source", a cloud storage system. In this way, they can be reproduced if their bodies are damaged. The settings of corgis and Lilims embody Donna Haraway's conclusion of the blurring boundaries between humans and animals, humans and machines, and physical and non-physical (Haraway, 1998). The eternity of Lilims' memories is also a realization of the statement in A Cypherpunk's Manifesto: "Information does not just want to be free, it longs to be free" (Hughes, 1993).

## The Deduction of Accelerationism

The name "Glitch City" can easily remind people of Glitch Feminism (Russell, 2020). In the book, Russell defines a glitch as follows: "A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function" (Russell, 2020, p.15). Glitch City certainly matches this definition. It is a city nominally governed by a democratically elected mayor, while actually under the control of a mega-corporation named Zaibatsu Corp., whose business is mainly about experimental

technologies. The corporation owns the city's media and military force headed by the White Knights, and tests its security, medical, and military technologies on a large scale within this nearly isolated city. The corporation announces via its news press that Glitch City is the most self-sufficient city in the world, but the lack of importing goods results in a serious shortage of supplies and inflation. Despite inflation and the difficulty of making ends meet, consumerism continues to prevail with ubiquitous advertising. Advertisements fill in every corner of the city: the TV in the bar, Jill's mobile phone, the streets that Jill passes every day after work, and so on. It is a city that should not exist.

While being such a dystopian city, accelerationists may see hope in its evolution. By referring to Nick Land (2017), we can posit that Glitch City is at the threshold where capitalism is at its peak of intensification and is about to destruct. The power of capital is so powerful that the government has become its mouthpiece; simultaneously, the increasingly fierce riots in the city are threatening capitalism. Will accelerationists achieve their goal of breaking capitalism? Glitch City doesn't answer this question as the novel ends before that possible threshold. It only makes part of the deduction based on the background of the story and invites players to think about the feasibility of accelerationism.

## Other Forms of Intelligence

Another point worth mentioning is the diverse forms of intelligence in VA-11 Hall-A. In the novel, Jill's customers are all intelligent identities: humans, corgis, Lilims, the brain in a jar, and so on. It is a world where non-human existences are naturally regarded as intelligent. This is not yet the case in reality: especially after the emergence of AI art tools and Large Language Models (LLMs), humans are struggling with the definition of intelligence because intelligence was once

unique to humans. However, as AI and other advanced technology grow exponentially, it is becoming obvious that there are forms of intelligence out of human cognition.

## Slow Cancellation of “Natural”

Drinks are one of the few elements that players can control. Weirdly enough, while many drinks are available at VA-11 Hall-A, they are all mixed out of the same five ingredients. The Beer’s menu description provides a clue:

“Traditionally brewed beer has become a luxury, but this one's pretty close to the real deal...”

This indicates that the drinks served at VA-11 Hall-A are made with chemicals or artificial ingredients. How would the public react to these drinks if they were introduced into the real world? We can imagine this by referring to Benjamin Bratton’s video lecture “The Synthetic and the Real” (2021). People would question the authenticity of the Beer drink, accusing it of being unnatural or fake. There is real beer in real life, so it's generally hard to imagine drinking "fake beer." However, this game leads us to imagine: if we have no choice but to “fake beer” due to reasons like shortages, will people detach “fake” from “artificial”? In fact, human society is not far from the “fake beer” situation: the fragile coffee industry is at stake because climate change will decrease the area of land suitable for coffee growing before the 2050s (Grüter et al., 2022). By that time, maybe humans will have no choice but to drink synthetic or artificial coffee.

## Visual Novels as Media

Visual novels are a kind of digital interactive fiction. While many visual novels including VA-11 Hall-A are also video games, the two terms are originally not interchangeable. Japanese often

differentiate between visual novels (NVL, derived from "novel"), characterized by extensive narration and minimal interactivity, and adventure games (AVG or ADV, from "adventure"), which involve problem-solving and various gameplay mechanics. For example, compared with highly interactive video games that allow players to choose what to say in a dialogue, VA-11 Hall-A only allows a few interactions like mixing drinks, customizing the bar's playlist, and buying (or not buying) things from the JC Elton's store. While the game mechanism is simple, it receives overwhelmingly positive feedback from players as shown on the Steam platform. Now, both visual novels and adventure games are often labeled simply as "visual novels" by players worldwide. There are several online communities built by visual novel fans for sharing visual novels, such as The Visual Novel Database and sub-Q (sub-Q unfortunately went on indefinite hiatus in 2020).

Reading/playing visual novels involves decision-making and strategy, which functions similarly to games. In the case of VA-11 Hall-A, players are willing to spend hours and days just to be Jill, mixing drinks and chatting with her customers. Since VA-11 Hall-A has multiple endings, players enjoy replaying the novel with different strategies in order to unlock different endings. The craze for achieving goals also extends beyond video games. For example, aside from in-game missions, many games have a series of achievements to complete and badges to earn on the Steam platform. According to Pellegrini, gaming is a low-cost simulation of possible scenarios in real life, which is one reason why humans have kept the play behavior till today (Pellegrini, 2009). Both visual novels and video games enable the creation of fresh reactions to unfamiliar surroundings, making them great opportunities for influencing evolutionary mechanisms that shape behavior (Pellegrini, 2009). On the other hand, visual novels are distinguished from video games by being more realistic in terms of causation. Video games

usually have more actions to choose from, and give immediate feedback to players' actions. However, visual novels usually provide limited interactivity, and players' actions have less impact on the virtual world and storyline. This kind of causal relationship setting of anti-individual heroism is realistic because the actions of an individual in reality seldom have a great impact on society. Therefore, visual novels can be a better reflection of reality than video games, prompting players to think about their relationship with the world around them.

Still, why do people need visual novels when there are already novels and movies? The reason may be that people love interactivity. It doesn't contradict the aforementioned reality that one has limited effects on the surroundings: interactivity might not change anything substantially, but it enhances the immersive experience. By incorporating players into the story world, visual novels invite players to better empathize with the story characters. Interactivity has become a trend even outside the gaming industry: we see websites with more and more interactive visuals and elements, interactive movies like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, interactive dramas like *Sleep No More*, and now visual novels like *VA-11 Hall-A*. Before, people could only passively read novels, possessing an omniscient perspective but not the ability to change the story world. Now, with simple clicks in a visual novel, players can directly participate in the story, interact with non-player characters (NPCs) to learn about its virtual world, and take actions that they can never or have few chances to take in the real world and see the actions' effects on the story world.

# Cyberpunk Aesthetics

VA-11 Hall-A is distinguished by its cyberpunk aesthetic, which is characterized by a fusion of advanced technology and societal decay typical of the cyberpunk subgenre. Originating in the 1960s and 1970s during the New Wave science fiction movement, cyberpunk became particularly popular in the 1980s. This genre often explores themes of artificial intelligence, cyberware, and dystopian societies, reflecting a postmodern cultural framework that embraces diverse and contrasting elements. If we trace the development of postmodernism, we can see that the rapid development of cyberpunk culture follows right after the prominence of postmodernism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jameson (1989) thinks it is crucial to understand postmodernism not merely as a stylistic choice but rather as a prevailing cultural framework, one that embraces and accommodates a diverse array of often contrasting elements. VA-11 Hall-A is a perfect example under this postmodern cultural framework: Jill serves customers every day from various backgrounds or species. Despite their differences, these characters face real-world struggles such as paying rent, scarcity of resources, conflicts among different interest groups, and lures like advertisements. Through these characters, players can recognize elements of their own lives and envision potential futures.

The cyberpunk aesthetics reflect contemporary societal trends and offer a speculative version of the future. On the one hand, high-tech is becoming increasingly powerful and intrusive. Especially since 2022, human society has been panicking at AI technology growing at an exponential speed. On the other hand, humans are facing climate change, increasing unemployment rate, work-life imbalance, and many other factors that undermine quality of lives. “High tech, low life” used to stay within the virtual realm, but now the reality is gradually



aligning with this cyberpunk feature. The boundary between reality and fantasy is vanishing. There is no so-called “fiction” or “novel” — everything is reality.

In *The Role of Play in Human Development*, Pellegrini writes that play exemplifies the interplay between biology and culture, mutually influencing each other (2009). To extend his idea, VA-11 Hall-A serves as a rehearsal space for the interaction between humans and both culture and technology. The anti-anthropocentric world is in sight, and humans are prompted to reflect on humanity, technology, and the ways to deal with a “high tech, low life” world.

## Future of Fantasy

If Kaczynski has seen visual novels like VA-11 Hall-A, he would say that they are typical surrogate activities and a feeble remedy for the disruption of the power process caused by the development of modern industrial society. The decision-making process throughout the visual novel is for achieving artificial goals, which have no direct relation to reality (generally speaking, one cannot get food or shelter from fantasy). Kaczynski’s vision for an ideal future is “wild nature” (Kaczynski, 1995, p.41), where goals are real instead of artificial, reachable via a certain amount of effort instead of easily or impossibly reachable. Therefore, humans don’t need fantasy as an ideal future lies in the past. However, Hayles states that underestimating the significance of virtuality is an error, as it exerts an influence far greater than the mere number of individuals engaged in it would suggest (2008). Robert J. Sawyer, a science fiction writer, holds that science fiction could function as a social critique, reflecting the present world. However, he thinks that science fiction can hardly maintain its former role as a dynamic force in shaping the future through imaginative storytelling, as it did in the twentieth century (Lee & Schroeder, 2008). This might not be the fault of fantasy. Mark Fisher writes in *Ghost of My Life* (2013) that

culture has lost its capacity to represent the present, or perhaps, in a significant sense, there is no longer a distinct present to comprehend and articulate. Fisher also states that we lost the future as well. For instance, “futuristic music” is no longer imagination of the future but a retrospective of the 1970s (Fisher, 2013). Still, many science fiction writers disagree with Sawyer by emphasizing the “social vitality of science fiction” (Lee & Schroeder, 2008, p.2). The documented discussions suggest the transition of mindset “from futurevisions to critical singularities”, meaning that we should not expect fantasy to foresee the future for us; instead, we should use fantasy to explore the singularity points of culture and technology.

VA-11 Hall-A is just an example of imagining such technical and cultural singularities. From discussions in the previous section, we see how the visual novel tells not a brand-new future but a reality that is already happening. Therefore, it is more accurate to see it as a reflection and critique of reality instead of a futurevision. While the novel doesn’t necessarily imagine a future different from the present reality, it is a conception of the eve when the frozen present is about to change.

## Limitations

Every work is bound by the norms of its time, and VA-11 Hall-A is no exception. Founded in 2014, Sukeban Game Studio initially centered around Japanese pop culture. While the game offers a unique narrative, it occasionally reflects the objectification of female characters common in Japanese anime. Some dialogues may discomfort female players; for instance, the use of "Boobtender" in the Appendix, likely intended as a joke by the developers, diverges from typical

female interactions. Given Jill's lesbian identity in the story, this derogatory nickname may stem from a misinterpretation of lesbian behavior from a male perspective.

Though not necessarily a limitation, VA-11 Hall-A could have more main characters to choose from. Currently, players only can experience Jill's life but may be curious about other character's experiences as well. Glitch City is a conceptual city worth more discussions and explorations, so allowing players to choose from various characters could be beneficial for players to learn about this dystopian world from multiple perspectives.

The low-level interactivity could also limit players' exploration of the story world. Compared with visual novels like *Disco Elysium*, players have nearly no control over the dialogues and cannot control which NPC to talk to. Nevertheless, the limited interactions are a characteristic of visual novels and help the story to focus.

## Conclusion

To conclude, virtuality has irreplaceable values, and fantasy is more than just a form of entertainment. It encapsulates important but seemingly obscure philosophical ideas, prompts individuals to contemplate present circumstances, and portrays potential turning points of human culture and technology, if not a version of the future. Through an analysis of VA-11 Hall-A in terms of its content, genre, and aesthetics, this essay illustrates how fantasy functions in these capacities, drawing connections to media theories and real-world relevance. Despite some limitations, fantasy like VA-11 Hall-A remains a catalyst for social reflection and development and offers insights into navigating the human-technology relationship.

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# Appendix



Apocalypticnick. *VA-11 HALL-A Cyberpunk Bartender Action- Jill is the customer for this day.*

*Alma is the bartender* [Screenshot]. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0ZOs-dBLcE>