

Are You Ready to Level Up?

By Emily Schoenbeck

Join us on the battlefield. Our everyday lives are being lived online. It's where we shop, play, and connect with other people, but as we migrate to the virtual world, we bring age-old problems—identity and responsibility—with us. As The Technology Age merges into the world of theater, playwrights are newly engaging with the conflict of reality versus fantasy. The imagined world of theater is serving as an ideal canvas for exploring the virtual world of video games. This year Bethany Lutheran College, under the direction of Benji Inniger, will be guiding us through virtual and real-life battlefields in their production of *Leveling Up* by Deborah Zoe Laufer.

Leveling Up is the story of three twenty-something roommates who are masters of the virtual world through their video game skills. Ian, Chuck, Zander, and Zander's girlfriend, Jeannie are also navigating the real world of growing up. After Ian is offered a job by the NSA piloting drones, the virtual world and the real one are about to collide as the stakes grow higher when virtual battles have real consequences. The play explores themes of war, growing up, and even touches on PTSD, but the cast will be quick to reassure you this play isn't interested in telling you what to think. It's strength lies in simply helping you ask the right questions to discover your own feelings.

It's a story with which Director Benji Inniger has become very familiar. Having worked for The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center as a sound designer, he was present when the play was workshopped in 2009 and was later on the design team for its premiere at the Cincinnati Playhouse. He's excited to bring his own interpretation to the latest production of a play he's watched evolve. Those who can't think about video games without hearing the Mario theme in their heads will be happy to know Inniger's background in sound will not go to waste. Audiences can expect a soundscape full of video game sound effects and music that will take any gamer back to their best days of smashing buttons in their parents' basement.

Video games are quickly becoming the most popular form of entertainment with new games often out-grossing box office hits. As we immerse ourselves in more engaging worlds of play, the possibilities and consequences of worlds without limitations emerge. Whether you own *Grand Theft Auto V* or just want to understand the kids these days, it's time to jump into the game. *Leveling Up* will be performing in The Normandale Theatre Thursday at 10:00am, 2:00pm, & 7:30pm. The cast and crew hope you'll join them to experience *Leveling Up* "IRL".