

It's Just a Game, Right?

By Emily Schoenbeck

We're going to watch a play about gamers? Aren't we supposed to be highbrow? Aren't we supposed to be the fine arts? We're going to watch a show about gamers, people who sit in a dark space with no windows as they lose themselves into characters and a fantasy playing out before them... this theater seat suddenly isn't the most comfortable place for criticizing. *Leveling Up* is a play about video games, but it's not *about* video games. This production presented by Bethany Lutheran College asks where do we draw the line between escapism and delusion.

This play, by Deborah Zoe Laufer, splits its runtime between two major plots. At the center is reclusive gamer Ian, whose been offered a job by the NSA to remote pilot drones. He reassures his friends however that he won't be the actual person firing the weapons, and the system is set up like a simulation, so he won't know when it's practice and when he's really aiming to kill. Running counter to his story is his friend Zander's; he's recently joined a supplement selling pyramid scheme. Zander pushes Ian to be a part of the "real" world, but the strength of *Leveling Up* lies in not knowing where exactly the real world is.

Telling ourselves stories is the heart of who we are as a people. Video games, and theater, survive on giving people the chance to immerse themselves in those stories. But that escape into fantasy becomes dangerous, the characters that don't ground themselves in real connections become lost. Whether it's Ian's disconnect from his military actions or Zander's blind belief his supplements are the next big thing, video games versus real life isn't the issue. The issue is something more raw to human nature, especially college students and graduates forming their identities: When is it time to stop lying to yourself? When do you need to take responsibility for what you've done?

The cast of four all give strong performances and carry the weight of the story well without ever sliding into melodrama. Hans Boedel, in particular, gives a painfully realistic portrayal of Ian as an awkward, misanthropic gamer. The play is rife with lighter moments and the comedic timing is delivered flawlessly. The character of Chuck, portrayed by Amir Trotter, manages to crack the audience up numerous times with facial expressions alone. There are a few moments where, OMG, the dialogue was slightly stilted, but they pass by harmlessly enough.

Directors and PR teams should take note of the production's pre-show house. When entering the theater, audience members are given one of ten possible trading cards of the show's

characters and key items. Once inside, they could wait for the show to begin by playing multi-player video games set up on large projection screens. With immersion as the theme, director Benji Inniger grabs you the moment you enter the theater.

Leveling Up takes its strength largely in its subtlety. This is not an “insert timely topic” play; it deals in broader ideas through current events. Appealing on the surface to gamers and college students, its emotional range broadens its appeal to anyone who ever feels disconnected in an increasingly “plugged-in” world.

Leveling Up By Deborah Zoe Laufer
Presented by Bethany Lutheran College
Directed By Benji Inniger

Cast Hans Bloedel, Tessa Snyder, Amir Trotter, David Roemhildt, Beret Ouren, Lydia Lonnquist

Designers & Crew

Sound Designer- Benji Inniger
Scenic Designer and Painter- Peter Bloedel
Costume Designer- Emily Kimball
Lighting Designer- Jake Yemish
Dramaturg- Molly Brueske
Stage Manager- Kasey Jo Gratz
Assistant Stage Manager- Patricia Lilienthal
Motion Graphics Designer- Kadya Wishcop
Graphic Designer- John Meilner