

Taking it to the Next Level

Nick Pearce

Video games are a huge part of life. Since they originated, they have permeated our cultural lexicon to the point where everyone knows at least a few terms of the virtual world (If you don't, either you forgot about Mario or are my mother). And it's in this vein that Deborah Zoe Lauffer's *Levelling Up* (performed at Normandale theatre by Bethany Lutheran College, 1/21 at 2 PM) is both a thought provoking and enjoyable piece of work, for hardcore gamers to casuals.

Now, for the n00bs who don't game, the first step is to choose a platform to play on. The set for *Levelling Up* was amazing. Located in a basement in Nevada, there's a level of detail in designer Peter Bloedel's work that is very familiar of the game dungeons you can find at a house belonging to someone you know. The ceiling was sloped, with black lining past the room walls, creating both a forced perspective to the room, and also giving it the frame of a TV screen. The effect was that we were sitting in front of a giant TV, just like if we were about to start a new game. Looking into the 'screen', we see comfortable lounging chairs and a battlestation (A gaming chair and PC set-up, the throne of a superior gamer). Behind the furniture, there are posters, shelves, rugs, and generally an incredibly detailed living room, by far the most in depth and complex that I've seen.

One of the coolest part of this show was its DLC (Downloadable Content). Walking in, there were 2 large screens set up with both Super Smash Bros and Mario Kart, so you could jump into the game before you were even seated. Collectible playing cards of the four characters were distributed in the program, and were easily identifiable as the characters were on stage, apparently zoned out playing video games themselves. When the lights began to dim, the mini-games were turned off, and we began the story mode.

The show examines the themes of escapism and the technological distancing of interaction with the onset of the Internet Age. Ian, Zander, and Chuck are all caught up with some facet of escaping life virtually. Ian, a prodigious gamer (played as true to a hardcore PC gamer as I've seen by Hans Bloedel, right down to the slightly vacant eyes of someone getting

pulled out of a marathon screen session) who gets a job flying drones for the NSA, begins to lose himself in the hours of simulated and real warfare in both his work and his games. Zander, (played by David Roemhildt) is a slacker who plays tons of video games but has little motivation for much else. Trying to get a job only sucks him into a more sinister fantasy: a pyramid scheme that consumes his time and money worse than the games can. Chuck (Amir Trotter, who is so good at acting like he's playing games IRL that I saw audience members duck in front of him as they were seated. They genuinely were confused), is a casino worker who plays games much more casually, as a source of fun and relaxation. Rounding out the group is Zander's girlfriend Jeannie, (Tessa Snyder, in a very believable portrayal of something unbelievable as a hardcore gamer having a girlfriend) a graduating college student who only games when with the roommates. Chuck and Jeannie begin a pseudo-affair over a Second Life-ish game, further showing virtual escapism and its harmfulness in large doses. As the character's lives become more and more entangled and escapist, events are thrown into play that can have huge effects, both in pixelated space and IRL.

While examining the performance as it twists through a socio-digital narrative, something is realized by the viewers. The performance of *Levelling Up* not only related to, but also had an *effect* similar to that of an amazing video game: Cool mini-games, an excellent plot in a setting that's amazingly detailed, with cool characters in conflicts that will engross you to thought as it plays out. Video games have already carved out a substantial niche in society; but this show takes it up to a whole new level.

Cast:

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

Technical:

Director: Benji Inniger

Scenic Designer and

Costume Designer- Emily

Sound Designer- Benji

Painter- Peter Bloedel

Kimball

Inniger

Lighting Designer- Jake

Yemish

Dramaturg- Molly Brueske

Stage Manager- Kasey Jo

Gratz

Assistant Stage Manager-

Patricia Lilienthal

Motion Graphics Designer-

Kadyn Wishcop

Graphic Designer- John

Meilner