DEAR TEACHERS:

THANK YOU FOR JOINING THE STEPPENWOLF FOR YOUNG ADULTS’ 2013/14 SEASON AS WE EXPLORE THE QUESTION, WHEN THE GAME TURNS DEADLY, HOW WILL YOU PLAY?

This fall, we presented the classic Lord of The Flies, and explored with students ideas around personal accountability, especially when faced with circumstances ostensibly out of one's control. For our second show of the season, we are proud to present Deborah Zoe Laufer's Leveling Up. This play centers on four twenty-somethings learning to develop their moral compasses amidst real and virtual-world consequences. We look forward to continuing our conversation with your students, asking, Who are you at your core?

As always, we look forward to continuing the conversations fostered on stage in your classrooms, through this guide and during our post-show discussions with your students following each performance. Thank you for the many ways you support Steppenwolf for Young Adults. We look forward to having you at the theater!

—Hallie, Megan & Lauren

Hallie Gordon
Artistic and Educational Director

Megan Shuchman
Associate Education Director

Lauren Sivak
Education and Community Programs Coordinator

As we did this fall, we have included information about how activities in our guide align with the Common Core State Standards College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards. Please see page 4 for a detailed outline of the standards met in this guide. If you need further information about the way our work aligns to the new standards, please let us know.

STUDENT, TEACHING ARTISTS AND TEACHERS IN SYA TRAININGS AND WORKSHOPS
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS
ALIGNED WITH ACTIVITIES
IN THIS STUDY GUIDE

HERE IS A LIST OF COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS THAT ALIGN TO THE INFORMATION AND ACTIVITIES IN OUR GUIDE:

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Standard 2
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
See Play Synopsis and Character Descriptions: pages 6 and 8.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing, Standard 1
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing, Standard 3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
See activity Who Are You at Your Core?: page 10.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening, Standard 1
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
See examples throughout guide.

If you need further information on how grade-specific standards fit into these anchor standards, please let us know.

PLAYWRITER’S NOTEBOOK:
INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH ZOE LAUFER

Interviewed by Young Adult Council Member and junior at Lincoln Park High School, Christian Vazquez

Christian Vazquez (CV): Thank you so much for meeting with me. I am really excited to be talking with you. To start, I want to ask you, when you first begin writing a play, are there any specific things you like to do?

Deborah Zoe Laufer (DZL): Lately, I start with a really big idea, a big question or something that bothers or worries me, and I do a lot of research on that idea to determine what I might write about. Once I find a subject that excites me, I populate it, and I find the characters that will tell the story.

CV: With Leveling Up, what was the big idea that inspired this story?

DZL: Both my sons are gamers and I am sort of an internet addict. I was really interested in that murky line between reality and virtual reality and so I knew I wanted to write about gaming; but, I didn’t want to write a play that was all about the harms of gaming because I think many aspects of gaming are really fantastic and many positive things can come from it. So I started with research first. There were so many things that amazed me researching this subject that I probably could’ve written 20 different versions of this play. When I found out that they were recruiting video gamers to operate drones, I knew I had my link.

CV: Once you knew your ‘link’ to the play, how did you get your inspiration for the characters you created?

DZL: My kids were my big inspiration. Some of the characters are named after my kids. For instance, one of my kids is named Charlie, and we call him Chuckstein. I didn’t make up that name, one of his teachers started calling him that and it stuck. All of the characters are based on people I know.

CV: Is there a character you most relate to in the play?

DZL: I relate to Jeannie. She is the fish out of water in the play and as she falls in to a very foreign world (of gaming) and has to try to swim in it. Overall, I feel for all the kids in the play because it’s tough to navigate through reality and virtual worlds. It’s not easy.

CV: Leveling Up deals with some really intense issues. What do you hope young people will take away from the play?

DZL: For all of my plays, I hope that they raise questions. We’re going to learn a lot more about the drone program as time goes on. We are going to have to face a lot of ethical issues about what it means to be in combat. I hope my play helps us start having these conversations. There are also a lot of questions around relationships in this play. Who are your friends? What does it mean to have a friend? What does it mean to unfriend someone with a click?

CV: OK, so tell me the truth: Do you play video games yourself? And if so, are you good or are you a newb?

DZL: I play a little bit with Charlie but I admit I’m terrible at it. I’m also addicted to online scrabble!

CV: OK, so a newb. [Both laugh.] Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. All of the Young Adult Council members are really looking forward to Leveling Up.

DZL: Thank you! Me too.

For more information on the Young Adult Council, please see the back cover.
Scene 1
The play opens with Chuck and his roommate Zander’s girlfriend, Jeannie, in a basement apartment, playing a Call of Duty-type war game, deeply engaged in a military operation. Jeannie, who seems to find it easy to open up to Chuck (who is happy to have alone time with a pretty girl), confides that her family is encouraging her to pursue medical school after graduation, despite the fact she would rather teach inner-city youth. Ian, Chuck’s roommate, enters, clearly agitated, and Chuck relays a message that a recruiter from the National Security Administration (NSA) stopped by looking for Ian, apparently not for the first time. Zander returns to the apartment elated with news that he has sold Ian’s virtual mask online—one used to ‘level up’ in a game—without his permission, only to learn that he sold it for one-third its worth. Zander quickly realizes the extent of his mistake as he ineffectually promises to find a way to pay Ian back despite the fact he has no job. The conversation becomes heated when Ian also accuses Zander of never paying his own way and Zander counters with a claim that Ian has “no real life” outside of videogames. Feeling backed into a corner, Ian declares his online friends are more real to him than Chuck or Zander, and wages that he can get a ‘real life job’ faster than Zander.

Scene 2
Scene Two begins with Chuck and Jeannie again, this time playing a SIMS-type, role playing game, choosing clothing and outfitting apartments for their virtual avatars, Earl and Daphne. After a few moments of innocent interaction, the avatars become flirtatious on the screen as their real-life controllers, Chuck and Jeannie, move closer and closer to one another on the couch. It becomes clear that the avatars and their controllers are taking things ‘to the next level’ until Zander unwittingly bursts in and interrupts, excited by his discovery of a fool-proof, get-rich-quick idea selling vitamin supplements, which Chuck aptly names a pyramid scheme. When a smug Ian returns from his successful job interview with the NSA, Zander unsuccessfully attempts to get his friends to buy into his newest venture. Eventually, Zander wears Jeannie down, convincing her to help sell his new business to some of her classmates.

Scene 3
Elated with news that he has been hired by the NSA, Ian enters the apartment and interrupts another fantasy World of Warcraft-type game playing session of Chuck and Jeannie’s, who has missed a class by getting sucked into game play. At first Ian is coy about the details of his work with the NSA, but temptation wins over and he begins to brag about the extent of his responsibilities, promising his friends to secrecy as he boasts about operating missiles for unmanned drones. When Jeannie and Chuck question the morality of what he is doing, saying, “But you’re going to be killing real people,” Ian justifies that more innocent people will live if he is in control, because he’ll “make sure it’s done right.” Proud of his newfound status, Ian offers to put in a good word at the NSA for Chuck, who evades, preferring to stay in his job as a casino dealer.

Scene 4
Ian is playing a game alone in the basement when Jeannie comes by looking for Zander, who isn’t home. We learn the extent of Ian’s disdain for Zander, whom he believes gets by in life based on his good looks alone, proclaiming Zander a “user.” Questioning the authenticity of Jeannie and Zander’s relationship, Ian accuses them that their feelings for one another are only surface level and we learn that on the day Zander and Jeannie met, Ian and Chuck were also there. Jeannie chose Zander because he was the one confident enough to ask her out.

Scene 5
Alone in the apartment with Zander off recruiting more of Jeannie’s classmates for his vitamin selling scheme, Chuck invites Jeannie to once again play with their avatars, Daphne and Earl. Despite naming aloud the fact that things got “wired” the first time around, Jeannie quickly caves, and the game between them becomes heated once again. This time it is Ian who interrupts, back from a 30-hour NSA training session. Chuck and Jeannie invite him to play with them as his avatar, Captain Outstando. After a few short moments of ‘leveling up’ Jeannie with free points, Ian quickly takes the game too far, making sexual suggestions toward Daphne that cross boundaries in the virtual and real worlds. Jeannie, upset, storms out of the basement.

Scene 6
Ian is alone in the basement playing an online war game. Due to exhaustion from all his work training, he does not play with his usual vigor and precision. When he attempts to connect with one of his online friends about something IRL (in real life), it’s clear the friendship is not as ‘real’ as he perceived it to be and Ian logs out, leaving him completely alone in the darkness of the basement.

Scene 7
Zander’s pyramid scheme has fallen apart: the vitamin business he bought into was a scam, and he has lost not only all of his money, but the money of all he convinced to participate. Chuck, in an act of true friendship and despite knowing likely nothing will come from it, accompanies a desperate and ashamed Zander to the police station to file a report against the company.

Scene 8
In his chair wearing a headset, this time at work, Ian is given the order to shoot, and when he does, it becomes clear that his missile has made impact with possible civilian targets. After Ian is congratulated for his shooting, we see his work mission morph into a game version, as the lines between Ian’s real work and virtual games begin to blur. Jeannie appears, anxiously looking for Zander, and is startled to see how clearly upset Ian is and how much his work is taking a toll on him, saying, “I can’t imagine what you’ve seen.” When she attempts to comfort him, Ian attacks Jeannie, pinning her down and goading her to hit and fight him. Zander and Chuck enter the apartment and hear Ian and Jeannie’s screams in the basement. Rushing downstairs, Zander pulls Ian off of Jeannie and badly beats him. Afterwards, Ian denies his friends’ help despite the fact he is bleeding, and instead picks up a controller, returning to his game.

Scene 9
Ashamed of his failed business venture and the resulting fallout, Zander collects his things, planning to move home to his parent’s house but without first saying good-bye to Jeannie. When Chuck tells Zander that Jeannie “deserves better” Zander can only reply, “I know.” Zander says good-bye to Chuck and tells Ian that he will eventually send a check to pay him back for the mask.

Scene 10
Jeannie, now a graduate, comes by to collect some of her things and finds Ian, who unsuccessfully attempts to apologize for his egregious actions. Ian tells her, “I don’t know what happened. That day. It’s not an excuse” as Jeannie listens and takes it all in. Before Jeannie leaves the basement for good, Chuck appears and suggests the impossible: that they leave the basement and get a bite to eat. Jeannie agrees but only if Ian will join. The play ends with the three friends heading up the stairs, out of the basement, into the real world.
ZANDER
Good-looking, charismatic and confident as a result, Zander impulsively
makes decisions and trusts that things will always work out for the best.
Used to being well-liked and popular and having been supported by his
parents throughout his college experience, Zander does not always take
responsibility for his actions or own up to his mistakes. In the play, this
ends up costing him his friendship with Ian and relationship with Jeannie.

QUICK FACTS as described by actor playing Zander, JJ Phillips

PERSONALITY TRAITS

STRENGTH

LOYALTY

INTELLIGENCE

SPEED

CHARISMA

OCCUPATION: Entrepreneur
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: Dating Jeannie
GAMER STATUS: Boss
FAVORITE FOOD: Mom’s Lasagna
FAVORITE SONG: “Tighten Up” by The Black Keys
FAVORITE BOOK: The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien
FAVORITE MOVIE: Children of Men
FAVORITE VIDEOGAME: Grand Theft Auto V

CHUCK
Goody and easygoing, Chuck often plays
the role of the peacemaker when caught
between friends Zander and Ian. While
his moral code doesn’t allow him to be sucked into working with the
NSA alongside Ian, he is willing to bend the rules when it comes to
pushing the limits of his virtual role-playing with Jeannie, with whom
he is smitten. Not overly-motivated, Chuck is contented with his job as
a blackjack dealer at a casino and has good—though not as good as Ian—gaming skills. At the end of the play, we see Chuck taking charge
of what he wants for the first time by finally asking Jeannie out.

QUICK FACTS as described by actor playing Chuck, AKA Chuckstein, Jerry MacKinnon

PERSONALITY TRAITS

STRENGTH

LOYALTY

INTELLIGENCE

SPEED

CHARISMA

OCCUPATION: Blackjack dealer
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: Single
GAMER STATUS: Pretty good
FAVORITE FOOD: Crab Rangoon all day!
FAVORITE SONG: “Amazing” by Das Racist ft. Lakitis
FAVORITE BOOK: Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.
FAVORITE MOVIE: Back to the Future, Part 1
FAVORITE VIDEOGAME: Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune

IAN
The true gamer of the group, Ian finds solace in his online friends more
than his real-life ones. Rarely leaving the house and anti-social, Ian
embodies what are often considered characteristics of a stereotypical
gamer. Having spent so many hours developing as a gamer, Ian is
fiercely protective over the merits of his skills, and does not appreciate
being accused that his online, virtual life is illegitimate.

QUICK FACTS as described by actor playing Ian, Clancy McCartney

PERSONALITY TRAITS

STRENGTH

LOYALTY

INTELLIGENCE

SPEED

CHARISMA

OCCUPATION: Professional gamer
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: Single...
GAMER STATUS: God
FAVORITE FOOD: Udon noodles with chicken soy sauce
FAVORITE SONG: Toss-up between “Basket Case” by DangerDoom
and “One Winged Angel: ACC Long Version” by Nobuo Uematsu
FAVORITE BOOK: Ender’s Game by Orson Scott Card
FAVORITE MOVIE: The Matrix
FAVORITE VIDEOGAME: Final Fantasy IVX: A Realm Reborn

JEANNIE
Smart, loyal and driven, Jeannie
commits herself to her schoolwork
and to her future goal to work
with inner-city children and to be the person who ‘actually helps.’ A bit
enchanted by all three of the guys in the play, despite her strength of
character, Jeannie is sometimes persuaded to skip class to play games
or to push the limits of appropriateness by playing a virtual game with
Chuck and taking it too far. In a true sign of who she is, Jeannie finds it
in herself to forgive Ian even after he physically and verbally attacks her.

QUICK FACTS as described by actor playing Jeannie, Carolyn Baver

PERSONALITY TRAITS

STRENGTH

LOYALTY

INTELLIGENCE

SPEED

CHARISMA

OCCUPATION: Student!
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: Zander’s girlfriend
GAMER STATUS: Bad compared to the guys but
much better than the average girl
FAVORITE FOOD: Mac and Cheese with Bacon
FAVORITE SONG: “We’re Going to Be Friends” by the White Stripes
FAVORITE BOOK: Harry Potter in this order: 1, 4, 7, 5, 3, 2, 6
FAVORITE MOVIE: Little Miss Sunshine and Mulan
FAVORITE VIDEOGAME: Skyrim
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: WHO ARE YOU AT YOUR CORE?

INSTRUCTIONS:
SYA created the quiz on the following page based on a fictional scenario inspired by Leveling Up. The goal of this quiz is to provide an opportunity for students to investigate how they make choices as themselves, and then what it is like to then make that same set of choices as someone else. Have students take the quiz twice.

5 mins
ROUND ONE:
Have students take the quiz and note which category they end up in as a result.

10 mins
ROUND TWO:
Now have students choose one of the characters listed on page 8 to embody when taking the quiz for a second time. Students should study the personality traits listed for each character. Have students take the quiz again and note which category they end up in.

15 mins
REFLECTION:
Have students answer the questions below and discuss or write a short narrative based on their experience of playing the game.

QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT:
1) What category did you end up in? What about when you played the game as a Leveling Up character?
2) What were the biggest differences between your decision-making and that of the character you chose to embody?
3) Was it easier to make decisions as yourself or as someone else? Why?
4) What were the benefits of getting to make decisions as someone else?
5) What surprised you about your choices and where you ended up at the end of the game?
IN RECENT YEARS, the United States military’s use of popular video game technology to pilot unmanned military vehicles and train military personnel has attracted a lot of media attention, often making it seem that the relationship between the videogame industry and military is a new one. In reality, the two share a long history, including advancements in gaming that have improved not only military training and weapon technology but have allowed civilians to play war games developed by the military for entertainment purposes.

In the early nineteenth century, the warfare board game, Kriegsspiele, was created to simulate war scenarios for use in training troops in decision making, long-term strategy tactics and team work; meanwhile, the game grew popular with civilians and was soon made available to the general public. With the invention of Atari, the first home video game system, video game popularity began to rise rapidly. In the early 1980s, the military began adapting many popular games—beginning with Atari’s Battlezone, which became Army Battlezone—providing the military with newfound training and simulation capabilities. In recent years, in addition to including games as part of the military’s official training regimen, military contractors have begun contracting video game developers for the designs of weapons found in the games (such as futuristic drone vehicles) for real combat purposes.

Games created for military use are now made widely available to the public as well. In games such as Marine DOOM (a modification of the popular first-person shooter game DOOM) enemies that once appeared as aliens in a fictional world are now human enemies in real-life foreign combat climates. In many of these games, designs are based off of real accounts by soldier consultants, ensuring that the mission one embarks upon as a player is authentic. In Marine DOOM, along with other games such as America’s Army, Call of Duty and Medal of Honor, civilian players can actually train alongside troops, getting the experience of participating in war. An acknowledged reason for making these games readily available to the public is for recruitment purposes, used to familiarize and attract young people into the military.

1824 Kriegsspiele, a board style “war game” is published by the Prussian general Baron von Reisswitz.
1884 American Kriegsspiel is created by Major W.R. Livemore to simulate naval war tactics.
1913 H.G. Wells creates Little Wars, a war game for young children that teaches military strategies; despite the fact Wells is a pacifist, he creates a game based off of military tactics for entertainment purposes.
1948 First fully-computerized war game is created by the army.
1958 Physicist Willy Higinbotham designs the first research-based game deemed ‘a video game.’
1962 Steve Russell creates Spacewar! the first digital, interactive video game; this game moves the technology into the popular sphere, making it available to any individual or company with a computer.
1970s First use of multi-player simulation game by the military, allowing them to train multiple troops simultaneously.
1980 Battlezone is released by game design company Atari and is subsequently modified to Army Battlezone by the American military, marking the first time a commercial video game is modified for military purposes.
1993 DOOM is released as the original first-person shooter game, allowing players to manipulate and construct weapons to kill virtual enemies.
1997 The Marines approve the use of popular commercial war games for training purposes and create Marine DOOM as an instructional tool for soldiers; that same year, Marine DOOM is released to civilians for entertainment purposes, paving the way for the genre of popular ‘modern military shooter’ games.
2002 The military releases America’s Army, a video game series entirely designed by the military to create the most realistic combat experience possible for civilians; authentic weapons and military technologies are used in game play.
2003 The commercial gaming empire, Activision, produces Call of Duty, another war game that allows users to travel through wars spanning from WWII to present day and beyond.
2008 The Army opens the Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, an entertainment facility in which young people and members of the public can come and play military-generated video games; the center is used primarily as a recruitment tool.
2012 Military defense contractors approach game designer P.W. Singer for blueprints to his futuristic drone vehicles created for Call of Duty: Black Ops II.
The term “drone” is a simple, shorthand way of referring to an unmanned aerial vehicle or any aircraft that flies without a pilot aboard the vehicle.

Drones offer two main advantages to the military: a pilot does not have to risk his life flying over enemy territory and they can fly for hours on end with no need to rest.

Unmanned aerial vehicles are used on a daily basis by the US Coast Guard to monitor coastal waters and major gas and oil pipelines.

It can take up to 170 people to operate and maintain one unmanned aerial vehicle.

It costs $103 million to build one Global Hawk drone.

There are currently more than 8,000 drones used by the United States.

The CIA conducts covert drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan while the US military largely conducts strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Civilian death tolls due to drone strikes are nearly impossible to calculate accurately but the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that potentially 1,200 civilians have been killed by drones in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan alone in addition to the deaths of enemy combatants.

More than 43 other countries in addition to the United States operate unmanned aerial vehicles.

“The future of drone development means faster, stronger, stealthier and possibly invisible drone vehicles. The use of drone technology changes the face and nature of warfare on many levels from the ethics around a soldier conducting combat thousands of miles from the actual frontlines to the nature of post-traumatic stress disorder many soldiers face from flying drones and facing the risk of killing innocent civilians in addition to enemy combatants.

In Leveling Up, much like real-life Air Force drone operator, Brandon Bryant, Ian struggles with his culpability in flying unmanned drones, far-removed from the impact. Bryant told NBC in an interview in June 2013 that after quitting his job with the Air Force, he became “troubled by the physical disconnect between his daily routine and the violence and power of the faraway drones.” He explained, “You don’t feel the aircraft turn, you don’t feel the hum of the engine. You hear the hum of the computers, but that’s definitely not the same thing.” Although Bryant and his team did what they could to avoid civilian casualties, he is still haunted by the alleged 1,600 people he helped kill as a part of his job from 2006 to 2011 where he guided unmanned drones over Iraq and Afghanistan bases from faraway bases in Nevada and New Mexico.

Brandon Bryant, former Air Force drone operator

“I didn’t know what it meant to kill someone. And watching the aftermath, watching someone bleed out, because of something that I did? There are plenty of us that have seen terrible things. It’s really more intimate for us, because we see everything.”

— Brandon Bryant, former Air Force drone operator

Quick Facts about Drone Warfare

1. The term “drone” is a simple, shorthand way of referring to an unmanned aerial vehicle or any aircraft that flies without a pilot aboard the vehicle.
2. Drones offer two main advantages to the military: a pilot does not have to risk his life flying over enemy territory and they can fly for hours on end with no need to rest.
3. Drones can be as small as an insect or as large as a commercial airplane.
4. Unmanned aerial vehicles are used on a daily basis by the US Coast Guard to monitor coastal waters and major gas and oil pipelines.
5. It can take up to 170 people to operate and maintain one unmanned aerial vehicle.
6. It costs $103 million to build one Global Hawk drone.
7. There are currently more than 8,000 drones used by the United States.
8. The CIA conducts covert drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan while the US military largely conducts strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq.
9. Civilian death tolls due to drone strikes are nearly impossible to calculate accurately but the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that potentially 1,200 civilians have been killed by drones in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan alone in addition to the deaths of enemy combatants.
10. More than 43 other countries in addition to the United States operate unmanned aerial vehicles.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: 
THE HISTORY BEHIND AND FUTURE OF DRONE WARFARE

WRITING PROMPT: The use of drone warfare is controversial. On one hand, with drone warfare, a pilot does not have to risk his life flying over enemy territory and can fly for hours on end with no need to rest. On the other hand, many civilian deaths are attributed to drones and many pilots and soldiers who operate these vehicles experience severe depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress due to flying drones and grappling with the innocent people killed as a result.

WRITING PROMPT INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS: 
After reading the information contained in this article and the prompt above, write an argumentative essay for or against the military’s use of drone warfare in modern-day combat. Your argumentative essay should include valid reasoning and sufficient evidence to support your claim. If you want to use additional evidence, refer to the additional resources on page 20 for support. Suggested length: 300 words.

DISCUSSION: 
Once students have written their essays, have them find a classmate who took the opposite side of the argument to discuss their similarities and differences.
THE UPSIDE OF GAMING: PROFILE OF A PROFESSIONAL GAMER, KEISHA HOWARD

In 2009 Keisha Howard, a self-proclaimed geek and avid gamer, founded Sugar Gamers, an inclusive, non-competitive network for female gamers to find community with one another and celebrate their love of gaming. Today Sugar Gamers serves as a home base for all gaming women in Chicago and beyond, from those who aspire to become game developers to those simply looking for an outlet to socialize and play games with friends. Howard, who states that gaming helped develop her reading and logic skills as a young person and ultimately made her “the person [she] is today” hopes that Sugar Gamers serves as a home base for all gaming women in Chicago and beyond, from those who aspire to become game developers to those simply looking for an outlet to socialize and play games with friends.

“I am making a living. A real living. Most people spend fifty hours a week at some job they freakin’ hate and go home to people they find boring and it’s the same thing day after day... Those people I [play games] with--those people—I can choose who I am, who I want to be. I can be myself with those people.”

– Ian, Leveling Up

Education and Community Programs Coordinator Lauren Sivak sat down with Ms. Howard to learn more:

LAUREN SIVAK (LS): At what age did you become interested in gaming?

KEISHA HOWARD (KH): Growing up with brothers, I became interested in gaming fairly early, sometime between the ages of eight and ten. It was exceptionally difficult to find other girls with similar interests. For that reason, I had mostly male friends and just played games with my brothers. Actually, I believe my interest in gaming came as a result of not having a lot of female friends and wanting to belong to a community.

LS: But that’s changed today.

KH: Absolutely.

LS: How so?

KH: Gaming no longer has one distinct face. We are entering a society where everything is a game and everyone is a gamer. The stigma about being a gamer used to be that you were socially awkward, lived in your parents’ basement, were not relationship oriented, and you were most likely male. These stigmas are starting to rapidly fade.

LS: Can you tell me a little about Sugar Gamers and why you founded it?

KH: There are more qualifiers for women to be legitimate gamers than there are for guys and a lot of female gaming groups are exclusionary and competitive. I saw there wasn’t a market for the female retro gamers, amateur gamers, puzzle gamers, etc. so that’s why I created Sugar Gamers. Most women have been socialized to believe they can’t be good at gaming. I wanted to create a group that challenged that.

LS: One of the characters in Leveling Up, Ian, talks about the community he has built with other online gamers. What do you make of that?

KH: Many gamers do find communities online, and can play with people from all over the world who enjoy doing the same thing they do. But for me, when you play online, the component of human interaction is missing. [Many people] don’t imagine gamers playing in a room together, but one of the things Sugar Gamers is known for is bringing people together physically—not just online. We provide opportunities for togetherness, networking and community.

LS: What are some of the other benefits around gaming you have found?

KH: When I was a kid, I developed my reading skills through playing the RPG (role playing game) Final Fantasy. I would play with my older brother who would make me read the dialogue from the game aloud. It helped develop my reading comprehension and logic skills and made me the person I am today.

LS: What do you say to those who argue that playing games is a waste of time?

KH: You go to a movie and you critique things about the movie afterwards. The experience is maybe four hours total. With games, depending on how long you play, you can be immersed for up to 60 hours in a story as a character: getting to see what it’s like to be that character, solve problems as that character. It’s really stimulating because in a game, you are part of the experience. And then, it also leads to more questioning: How was this game made? How did they put this game together? I believe young people who play games develop comprehension and logic skills from them. It’s not only entertainment.

LS: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.

KH: I am really excited you are doing a play that involves gaming. I can’t wait to see it.

JANE McGONIGAL, PhD, is a game designer and author of Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World. She shares Howard’s sentiments, saying, “Gaming is productive. It produces positive emotion, stronger social relationships, a sense of accomplishment, and for players who are a part of a game community, a chance to build a sense of purpose.”

QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION:

1.) Do you agree with Howard’s notions about the positive aspects of gaming? Why or why not?

2.) What are other upsides of gaming in addition to those Howard mentions?

3.) What downsides exist within gaming? What are the negative aspects not represented here?

4.) Jane McGonigal (mentioned above) proposes that, as a planet, we should spend 21 billion hours a week playing video games because of the benefits we gain from gaming. Where do you see the positive and negative effects of that amount of gaming?

In this informational report of unmanned aerial systems, military aviation specialist Jeremiah Gertler breaks down the different types of drones, robotic armed systems and unmanned aerial vehicles that are used for military and surveillance purposes by the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security. The report also includes cost management analysis, pilot requirements and an easy to read breakdown of the various drones used for specific operations.


Game designer Jane McGonigal gives a TED talk on how video games can increase life expectancy and teach users how to view the world, solve problems and improve our reality.


A chronological overview of the use of military simulation games for training purposes including an overview of the military use of civilian computer and video game technology for the creation of training games.


PBS offers an interactive overview of the history of video games from the 1950s until present day also touching on key debates such as violence, profiles of gamers and game developers as well as a discussion of the history of gaming.


Political scientist P.W. Singer gives a TED talk exploring the advancing robotic technology that is rapidly changing the face of military warfare.


Matthew Power, author of Confessions of a Drone Warrior, interviews political scientist P.W. Singer on the increasing gap between advancing technology and governmental policy to regulate the use of cyber warfare and also psychological effects on users of cyber warfare technology such as drone pilots.


A recording of the 1993 Congressional Hearing that involved testimonies from Nintendo and Sega executives and Senators Joseph Lieberman and Herbert Kohl as the groups grapple over passing a bill that requires video games to be labeled in accordance with their violent and sexual content.
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The Young Adult Council is a unique program for passionate and motivated high school students who wish to learn the inner-workings of professional theater from the most celebrated artists in the city. In addition to face time with these leading professionals, Council members attend the best plays in Chicago, learn how to analyze and speak about these plays and lead events for their peers around Steppenwolf productions in hopes of inspiring a new generation of theatre enthusiasts and practitioners.

Applications are available on March 1, 2014.

Like the Steppenwolf Young Adult Council on Facebook! Or visit steppenwolf.org/youngadultcouncil for more information.

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