

THE VIDEO GAMES:

How Two Guys Are Giving Theatre An Extra Life

By Sergio Solorzano ~ Photos by Mia Isabella Aguirre



CHOOSE YOUR CHARACTER NYC, Off-Broadway Cast

For those who love video games, there are moments when real life and game intersect. Times when life seems to present a new quest, foe to face, or even a chance to restart. For Jared Pixler and David Evan Stolworthy, such a moment came during a walk on Venice Beach. After pouring their efforts into an unsuccessful project, the duo felt defeated. It was then that they faced a choice. Was it "Game Over"? Or would they "Continue"? Armed with nothing more than giant margaritas and dreams, they decided to continue. What happened next launched *The Video Games*, a play that aims to re-imagine the way we look at theatre.

Pixler and Stolworthy met at The American Musical and Dramatic Academy, where they quickly formed a friendly rivalry for a competitive play-writing program. Both were awarded a

school-funded performance of their work, and continued to the Hollywood Fringe Festival. There, they collaborated on a series of original plays and a cabaret. The result? "It was kind of a crap season," said Pixler during a recent interview.

"We had an audience every show, but it was not great." Faced with the disappointing turnout of their debut, the friends regrouped on the Venice Beach boardwalk.

What started with a peaceful post-mortem turned into a margarita-fueled brainstorming session. It was there that a geeky argument ensued that altered the duo's creative future: "Pikachu would totally win the *Hunger Games*!"

Perhaps the most miraculous happening, however, was that the pair actually managed to take notes. Notes that, when reviewed sober, still held great ideas. Pikachu in the *Hunger Games*



turned into a full on video games/*Hunger Games* crossover. Taking the bar napkins and receipt that held their notes, the duo got to work on the first draft of what would become *The Video Games*.

In the two years that followed, *The Video Games* has seen several transformations and stagings. What started as a straight-up parody of the *Hunger Games* has evolved into a combat-heavy, audience-interactive, multiple-ending play. It performs monthly in Los Angeles, and recently started an Off-Broadway run in New York City. Much of the show's success can be attributed to the fact that the creators are all-in.

"It's a passion project to us but it's worth it," said Pixler, who had to quit his day job when the show started touring. "We always say 'I would rather have tried to do something than not, and wondered what if?' So it's a giant, giant leap of faith."

One of the show's trademarks is the branching story. Because it is a game, any character has the potential to win. This means that every performance unfolds differently. And it's the audience that decides the result. Sometimes that decision is direct, such as raising hands to vote for which character lives and dies in a currently happening battle. Other times, events result from smaller decisions made earlier in the show. At the show's start, a single audience member is given a one-up mushroom from the *Super Mario* games. That mushroom doesn't come into play until a point near the end. Only then is that audience member forced to choose between bringing back a dead favorite and forcing an annoying announcer to take part in the games.

Pixler and Stolworthy have been experimenting with the audience-influenced bits since the very first staging of the show. They recall renting a classroom from their old college to make "a conspiracy theory chart" on the whiteboard. They started slowly, only introducing four possible end scenarios. Then they added more. After that came variations, like what if two characters won? What if they all died? Yes, there is actually an ending where all but one character "is bloody and dead."

Keeping track of so many different endings also makes the show unique on the production side. Actors who are cast in



the show are given a script that looks like a choose-your-own-adventure novel, with various appendixes to flip to depending on what happens. They must also be proficient enough in stage combat and improvisation to roll with a show that changes on the fly.

This is managed with a lot of help from Matt Franta and Brandon Pugmire, the show's fight directors. They developed the choreography together and have stuck around to assist as new casts come in.

For Franta, the biggest challenge is keeping the moves consistent. "The actors all have a huge amount of choreography to learn in this show," he wrote. "We have regular brush-up rehearsals and a fight call before each show so the actors can go through all of their choreography."

On the same lines, Pugmire brought up the concern of safety. "Safety is top priority," he said. "We want the audience to feel that they are watching a real, violent encounter take place while the actors feel that they are never going to be injured in the process."

Even the stage crew must be flexible. This is very different from most plays, where crews do the same thing every night. Pixler and Stolworthy recalled several performances where crews came dangerously close to missing light and sound cues because the show took an interesting new direction. Sometimes, they simply got wrapped up in watching the show.

On the other side of the stage, the passion is even more intense. Audiences are some of the most diverse in theatre, consisting of some combination of people who enjoy gaming, theatre, stage combat, comedy, and audience participation. The duo accommodates their unique fandom by producing the show in unconventional arenas.

Alex Genter is a Los Angeles actor who has performed the show in one very unique space: comic and gaming conventions.

"It feels like we are doing a live WWE match," Genter wrote in an e-mail, "with crowds full of cosplayers yelling and screaming for their favorite characters. It's such a rush to have an audience so engaged in our fights and scenes!"

Sarah Ruttan, one of the original cast members, gets excited when they bring the show to traditional theatre crowds.

As these crowds aren't always familiar with gaming, Ruttan observed that they "are prepared to sit for an hour

and a half, and enjoy being taken out of the world, with little to no participation in events unfolding. This show blows that all away."

Lately, the creators have talked about courting a fresher audience: high schools. Initially a confusing idea, it made sense once Stolworthy explained it. "Kids, when they think about theatre, it's *Romeo and Juliet*, it's heightened language, it's sitting in a chair for the next three hours. Instead, we want to introduce them to things they've never been exposed to before: stage combat, blood and gore effects, and non-linear writing."

Pixler added that *The Video Games* could be a gateway. "If we can give them something accessible to draw them in and then study the great works, that's amazing."

With all of these plans in addition to the current productions of the show, one question comes to mind: how do Pixler and Stolworthy find the time? "Wine helps," Stolworthy jokes. Pixler added more seriously that they simply don't sleep. He quit his job when the show went to New York in order to give it more time. Stolworthy himself works three jobs, but uses his weekends to audition new casts and attend rehearsals. Wherever the show does end up going, these guys are determined to be there.

Stolworthy summed up his intent like this: "What's that awful high school quote they always put in yearbooks? 'Shoot for the moon, if you miss you'll land amongst the stars.' No, no we're going to the moon!"

Who knows? They've certainly done a lot with the passion, talent, and friends they already have. If they keep chasing their dreams (and the occasional margarita) they might just make it to that level.



Alex Genter (Commander Shepard) and PJ Megaw (Scorpion), Sarah Nielsen (jigglypuff, partial pictured)