


Level Zero

Jaron Lee Knuth

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The never-ending wars, pollution, and overpopulation of the near future have caused the outdoors to become uninhabitable, and the government is forced to create a new world, a virtual existence that allows civilization to continue. Shopping malls, schools, concert venues, and religious gathering places all exist in the infinite confines of this new reality, yet the most popular domain for most teenagers is the one that houses the endless array of digital games.

When the sequel to a popular title is released to the public for a special beta test, a group of players eagerly log in to try out the new experience. What seems like harmless violence quickly turns all too consequential when the players realize the game's biggest error: They can't log out. Forced to battle their way through an endless army of monsters programmed to kill their avatars, the players must fight against the clock and find a way out of the game before the real world catches up to them.

Level Zero Details

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From Reader Review Level Zero for online ebook

Robert says

"Brilliant" is perhaps the most overused word when reviewing a book. Yet, this time I am unable to say anything else: this book is simply brilliant.

I really like the character development, especially when it comes to Arkade.

The plot is absolutely believable and enjoyable, even for those who are not familiar with MMORPGs. Well done!

Travis says

Hmm, this book was interesting, but it wasn't quite what I expected when I picked it up for reading. Also, I don't think the author spent enough time working on the personalities of the NPC characters, since they basically went from cardboard cutouts to rabid dogs in no time flat. There really ought to be some sort of progression there, since the way it was all explained at the end of the book would seem to indicate the NPCs were building up to this for a long time (according to them), but there was zero evidence of such before it all went to hell in a handbasket. There really needs to be some sort of foreshadowing, curt NPC interaction, or some other method of at least giving the reader a peek into how unhappy the NPC characters are before they all just flip out for no apparent reason.

Otherwise, the story wasn't a bad one. It's been done before of course, but the storyline didn't feel cloned or contrived in the least, except for possibly the second meeting of the main character and the second party he created, since they broke down several blocks away from the safe zone he was in, and yet they claimed it was the closest one to their location when all hell broke loose, but we find out later, that some NPCs were helping folks get to safe zones, and it's kind of hinted that these safe zones were plentiful, though that wasn't really stated, so it could just be my misinterpretation here.

Even so, allowing for minor issues (such as why the hell the NPCs were killing players in the first place, when there was only a single person they were after, which never was explained), the story as a whole reads fairly well, and it's only at the very end we're told one of the players isn't, (though it was hinted at earlier), and another of the players who refuses to log out because he hates his real life, and loves the virtual player that isn't, and you get all sorts of circumstances that could lead to a pretty terrible story if handled incorrectly, but that isn't the case here. Sure, the story could have been a little better, but for the most part, it was handled very well, and the story flows well enough to keep interest up until the end. I'm not sure I agree completely with the ending, but it's not my story to tell, so one must accept the author's interpretation of events after all, since it's their story. Overall, this story should appeal to younger readers, gamelit fans who don't mind a bit of slack in the story, and those not looking for LitRPG elements, as there really wasn't much of that in this story.

If you're after more pure LitRPG type storytelling, this probably isn't the story you're looking for.

Hamda says

The author was out drinking with his buddies when they start talking about their kids "you know my kid is glued to his computer all day! I don't know what to do!" "yeah, mine rarely speaks to me or his mother anymore, he's at that age I guess" "yeah, everything I do now seems to embarrass him!"

The all laugh and nod.

20 years later, we have this book.

The MC is not a person so much as he's a stereotype of an antsy teen from a parent's perspective. The world created is.... ummmmmm I'm not really sure, it's just a mesh of genres there in battle royale.

The is a book that tries to focus on the human element, by removing it and talking from a parent's perspective. The fact that the actual story part started at the 60% mark is also another thing, that means that only 40% of the book is the story while the rest is a bit of world building and A LOT of teen ants... I would not recommend this book, I'm old enough to not need to hear what my father thinks of... EVERYTHING! At least not willingly...

Josh says

I really wanted to like this book after listening to the preview over at audible. I really did. But it's dull. It was difficult to get all the way to the end. LitRPG is a newer genre and too many times the stories come across written at an immature level. This was a good example of that flaw. I wasn't invested in the characters, the story didn't draw me in and even the narrator sounded bored at times.

At best I would rate it "meh."

Autumn Box says

Good book. Was a fast read. If you like dystopian fiction and need something quick but can put down to do something around the house. This is a good one.

Eric Mesa says

I understand what Mr Knuth was trying to accomplish with this narrative. While the plot twist was neither original nor unpredictable, it really wasn't the point of this story. In fact, while reading I was thinking this book would warrant a 1 or 2 star rating. It took a long time to get anywhere and seemed to be too meandering. I figured that's because it was book one of a series and we weren't going to get a conclusion. But no, this book stands alone just fine.

In the end, the book earned 3 stars from me because as a book about the emotional growth of the main character it succeeded rather well. The growth seemed well earned and didn't come out of nowhere. I have no desire to read the next book, but I'm glad I enjoyed this one in the end.

Pam says

Free on kindle...A very fast read, 1 night. I liked it, maybe because i like games. I think i would have really

liked a longer adult version. The first half of the story (the build up, learning of their world) was the best part for me. A fun story for YA and all. Thank you for the book.

Derek says

I really enjoyed this book. It reminded me of Ready Player One in some regards, which is one of my all time favorite books.

I loved the world created within this virtual reality, and as a gamer, I loved the plot.

I may have felt that the story took some easy ways out here or there, but that does not change the fact that it was a very interesting story, and it kept me engaged the whole time.

If you're into gaming, virtual reality, or like similar books, you will like Level Zero.

I look forward to reading some of the authors other books as well.

Parham Doustdar says

This book delivered. In fact, it delivered more than I had expected.

I knew there was a twist, and I suspected the most hurtful one. However, I didn't expect the author to follow up with it. He did, though.

The ending was a bit weird, but I'll just pass that off as the author's attempt to teach a lesson to the reader; a very valued lesson indeed.

Elizabeth says

I have read all of Knuth's published books now, and I have to say, I believe he has outdone himself with this one. No, I am not a young adult, nor do I participate in gaming; however, I found myself reading voraciously and well into the night (OK, two nights).

I have always enjoyed dystopian books. This is one of the best of the hundreds I've read throughout my lifetime, and I'm well into my fifth decade. Knuth's ability to develop his characters goes beyond amazing. His plot ideas are amazing. The vistas he creates with his words are breathtaking.

For anyone who enjoys dystopian novels — for anyone who wants edge-of-their seat action — for anyone who wants a book that will keep them enthralled, I highly recommend Level Zero!

Tammy K. says

I'm struggling to find the words to describe this story. I am not an author just a reader so here's my review short and to the point.

Get this one! It's a dystopian like no other.

The characters find themselves locked inside a combat action, virtual reality game and must learn to work together in order to escape.

as I read this story I found myself lost in their world with them, climbing the mountains, slaying the Dragon, cheering for their victories and feeling their losses as they lost team mates.

It's a great story suitable for all ages.

AudioBookReviewer says

My original Level Zero audiobook review and many others can be found at Audiobook Reviewer.

“Level Zero” is a coming of age Literary Role Playing Game (LitRPG) story which is the first book in the NextWorld series. The book is written by Jaron Lee Knuth and the audiobook is very well narrated by John Pirhalla. The author has quite a few books under his belt, however this one appears to be the only book currently available, at the time of this review, in audiobook format. I assume the author and narrator will be bringing the second book in the series (Spawn) to audio in the future. If you enjoy young adult (YA) coming of age stories that have science fiction and gaming elements with an interesting Blade Runner look and feel, I believe you will like Level Zero. Even though the book is the first in a series, I felt the story concluded quite well for the first in a series with the author giving us a view into what to expect in future books. That is to say, this book could be read as a stand-alone novel without any cliff hangers or other aspects requiring you to read the other books in the series; but I would be surprised if you did not want too. When binary numbers are used for the chapter titles, you know you are in for some computer gaming fun.

The main character is a fifteen-year-old who lost one of his parents and is estranged from the other; who is a highly politically involved individual. Our main character has a single friend in the world and they both enjoy putting all their time in to playing virtual reality games for escape. Although it sounds similar to all the other dystopian coming of age books in the genre, the author is able to set his story apart by creating a rather unique and different world from the others. In this story, the world outside of their living space is crumbling and becoming toxic. However, the space outside is filled with cable and wires providing feeds for the ever-present virtual world; think of it as the Internet times ten. A person is given a small physical living space for storage, sleeping and eating. Each room also comes with a pod allowing a person to jack into the virtual world. Food, Vitapaste, is provided in a protein paste format used to sustain everyone; yummy. It is a rather grim and dirty world, and that is why so many want to escape to the ever-growing virtual world.

Everything from meeting up with your friends, education, work, and even religion occurs in the virtual world. The pods are programmed to terminate your virtual connection when food or sleep are required as a safety precaution. The world has a very socialistic feel with the government running, providing and overseeing nearly everything. When a new beta world is available to only a select few, our characters jump at being given the opportunity to join. Once in the new game, things go from bad to worse as they become trapped with their only escape being to win the game. This newly created world is exactly what one would expect from your standard fantasy RPG. There are warriors, rogues, magic users, etc. Everyone needs to

also trust and depend on the others in their party to survive. However, the author did a good job of crafting some new and unique weapons and upgrade options. It helped give the book a different angle than so many others in the genre. Think fantasy world blended with a few of the amenities of the modern world.

Let me turn to the book's characters. I felt the characters were overall well rounded and had good interaction with one another. I would have liked to have had some additional background on a few of the characters joining the party to help me better understand their actions. Each of the major characters had some issues that needed to be resolved as well as trust needing to be built for the party to succeed at their task. What complicates things even more is that the new beta program locks our unsuspected group in the virtual world where they will starve if they are unable to escape. The security protocols have all been compromised and our characters must win or perish due to starvation. This is where the main arc of the story picks up as they try all they can to escape the program and save their lives. The book focuses mainly on friendships with light romantic elements included. If I could change one thing, it would be the continued use of the word "Yo" by one of the party characters.

The book's narration was done very well and I enjoy John Pirhalla's voice. I have listened to a few other books by this narrator including the Origin of F.O.R.C.E. series by Sam B. Miller II which I enjoyed quite a bit. His voice is mellow and pleasant to listen to, yet he is able to also keep things exciting during scenes of intense action. John was able to bring life and distinction to each of the main characters by giving them unique personalities and accents. He even included a few audio extras that make the book come alive in audio format. I do not recall any issues with the audio itself, only a professionally produced audiobook.

I have to give the author credit as I do not remember any use of vulgar language in the book, nor any oversexualized sections. The book's is designed to be read by younger audiences except from a few rather graphic scenes of violence. The book also does not fully address the tension between parent and child, as with most Disney stories, but I was happy to see that this book can be read by younger audiences; who I think will enjoy it quite a bit.

In summary, if you like a book in the LitRPG genre and you are wanting something a little bit different or unique, I would recommend you pick up Level Zero and give it a try. Most books in this genre often contain vulgar language or adult subject matter, where this book does not. It is a fun, interesting, yet rather dark view into the future of virtual reality. And remember, make sure to brush your teeth after eat your Vitapaste before going to bed tonight!

Audiobook was purchased for review by ABR.

Nancy says

Level Zero was an interesting take on teen dystopian. In this particular world, overpopulation became such an issue that people were basically herded into incredibly tall apartment towers. The towers seem to be pretty tiny, but that's okay. Nobody lives in the real world, anyway. They all live online, in a virtual reality world, logging off only to use the bathroom and eat a gooey "vitapaste" that has all their nutritional needs in it. Our hero, Arkade, would stay logged on for the rest of his life if he could. He strongly prefers gaming solo to anything social. I thought my social awkwardness was bad... This boy makes me seem like social butterfly of the year. He has no desire whatsoever to interact with anyone, not even in his games. The game he prefers to play allows grouping and chat, but he refuses to group with anyone or even say so much as hello to other players. When the long-awaited sequel to his game is released in beta and he is chosen as a beta tester, Kade

eagerly logs on to try it out. Soon, however, Kade finds that he cannot log off. Nor can anyone else. Forced to team up with his only friend and a few other players for survival, Kade slowly learns to socialize and even to love.

Level Zero was a good, solid story. The characters were interesting, and the society was intriguing. I would have liked to know more about the world's society and how it got to where it was. What exactly led up to the apparent single, world government? Why were North Americans discriminated against? The no teeth thing...what's up with that? Did they just evolve to not need teeth because of the paste they eat, or do they have them removed? I really want to know this. I know, it's not important to the story and doesn't really matter, but dang it, I just want to know! Oh, and Fantom's "slang" drove me like crazy or whatever, yo. Seriously. There has to be more than just three slang words. I wanted to shake her. Also, the ending left me a bit unfulfilled. I don't know, I just think it could have ended better. It didn't really seem like Kade learned as much as he could have learned. Still, great story.

Victoria Zagar says

I picked this up when it was a free download on Amazon.

This was a very enjoyable book. Rich world building and a great cast of characters made me forget that this story about being trapped in an online video game probably isn't the most original idea. However, Knuth makes this story his own by the end with some clever twists and turns that I completely didn't expect. The action is fast paced and never leaves the reader bored.

If I had any complaints it would be that the editing really slipped by the end of the book. Typos scatter the last few chapters especially. I would love to see this book picked up by a big publishing house, it's a great YA novel with a lot of promise and was a lot of fun to read.

Stacie Herbert says

As a Girl gamer I feel in love with this concept. It was an easy light read fun and fast paced.
