

Level Up Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"Level Up" tells the story of Dennis Ouyang who was just a young boy when he discovered the enchantment and allure of video games. Unlike many of his friends and classmates, Dennis was not given a weekly allowance. His Asian parents believed in hard work and instilling a superior work ethic in their children. They worked hard for their money and they didn't believe in wasting it on frivolous things like game playing. Yet his fascination with playing video games only increased. He loved watching the other kids play and when he was at the arcade and no one was around, he would grab the joystick and pretend he was playing.

Although he wanted a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas, his father insisted on giving him a chemistry set. It was more important to begin building a career than spending hours playing mindless games. Dennis' father wanted him to become a doctor. After Dennis graduated from high school, his father died. He was grief-stricken but the first thing he did was drive to the electronics store and purchase a game system. He finally felt free to pursue his own desires.

However, Dennis' mother urged him to major in pre-med courses at the university. But Dennis was so obsessed with game-playing that he was kicked out of school when he was a junior. He was ashamed and didn't tell his mother. After being suspended from school, Dennis spent one hundred percent of his time playing games. It all caught up with him when his mother was hospitalized. She was very hurt to learn that her son had been suspended. That was when the "angels" first visited him.

Four sweet-faced angels came to Dennis and told him that his destiny was to be a gastroenterologist, which came as a shock to him. The angels convinced the dean to let Dennis back in school. They also helped him at home with cooking and cleaning so he could devote all his time to his studies. He was eventually accepted into medical school. He made some very good friends there who all had their own issues but Dennis did not feel comfortable with the course of study. Every time he weakened, however, the angels were there to boost his spirits and to urge him to have "endurance."

Dennis finally understood that the "angels" really represented his father's broken promises to his own father. He had vowed to become a doctor but failed to do so because of the language barrier and due to the arrival of his son. It was Dennis' father's guilt that created the "angels" in an attempt to force Dennis into a medical career. Dennis' father wanted Dennis to have a better career than he did. Dennis was truly liberated when he realized why he had been forced into a career that he wasn't sure he even wanted. Once he did that, he felt liberated and quit medical school. But after a year of game-playing, he found that life empty and not rewarding. Dennis made the decision himself to return to medical school and in doing so, he left his childhood behind him.



Press Start to Begin

Press Start to Begin Summary

The first arcade video game that Dennis Ouyang ever saw was an antiquated Pac-Man game that was coin-operated. He discovered the game in the lobby of a Chinese restaurant near his home. He went to the restaurant with his parents when he noticed the video game. He was immediately distracted by the arcade game. He looked at the screen and the joystick and was immediately enchanted. His parents kept trying to get him to go into the restaurant but he kept delaying them because he was so intrigued by the game. Finally, his father but his foot down and told him that they had to enter the restaurant to eat dinner "now."

The entire time the family was in the restaurant, all Dennis thought about was Pac-Man. As the waiter took the family's orders, Dennis could envision Pac-Man chasing and eating the dots before him. The whole time they ate their dinner, it was the same thing—Dennis could only think of Pac-Man. As they left the restaurant, he stared at the Pac-Man video game as they left. That night he dreamed in pixels and from then on, he dreamed in pixels.

When Dennis started third grade, he was astonished to see that a convenience store near his house installed a Super Mario Brothers video game. Again, he was totally captivated. The store wasn't really on the way home, but Dennis would often stop by after school anyway. He was glad when other kids were playing so he could watch. He didn't get an allowance because his family didn't believe in them. Do he didn't get to play because he had no money. His mother always told him that his father worked hard and that the money he earned should not be wasted on frivolous pursuits like video games. Even though he could never play at the store, if no one was around he would move the joystick around, make his own sound effects and pretend he was playing.

From classmates at school, Dennis learned about the Nintendo Entertainment System, a system that could be installed in one's home. It was heavenly news to Dennis. There would be no limit to how much he could play. He could play day and night. Christmas was coming so Dennis dropped numerous hints that all he wanted was a Nintendo Entertainment System. He left a note hinting as much on the Christmas tree, on the refrigerator, on his dad's coffee cup, on the rear view mirror in the family car, and on family photos hanging on the wall. Dennis was crushed on Christmas morning that the square gift-wrapped packaged that he thought was the Nintendo was actually a chemistry set. He demanded an explanation from his father. Over the next few weeks, his father complied. This time, he left notes for Dennis all over the house—on the TV, on Dennis' drinking glass and even on his pillow. He left notes for his son that referred to "how to get into college," what the best jobs were, how tough the job market was and the importance of a good work ethic.



Dennis overheard his mother and father talking about the situation. His mother was worried because Dennis had not opened his chemistry set. She suggested they get him the game system for his birthday. His father was adamant that he not be given such an elaborate gift. He had to work hard for what he had and his son should learn the same lesson and not be spoiled. Dennis reluctantly opened his chemistry set. Maybe there was something to what his father was trying to teach him.

Sadly, two weeks before Dennis graduated from high school, his father died of liver cancer. The death was very hard on Dennis. He lingered by the casket long after everyone else had left. Although he was in mourning, Dennis drove right from the funeral parlor to the electronics store. He bought his first game system and began playing that very night, even though tears were streaming down his face. Dennis became obsessed. He played and played and played—everywhere and at every opportunity. He played until the night that "they" came to visit.

Press Start to Begin Analysis

Dennis Ouyang struggled between two cultures. As an Asian American, his father believed in a strong, almost punishing work ethic and eating "bitterness," to build character. By this phrase, his father meant that his children will grow to adulthood possessing a good character and work ethic if they are not spoiled as children. But Dennis was in America and most of his classmates were not Asian. When the Nintendo Entertainment System was produced, Dennis wanted one just like all his friends. But his father decided that it was more important to give him a chemistry set for Christmas than the game system. His father was focusing on Dennis' future. Having a background in chemistry and doing well at school was much more important than playing mindless games. Dennis tried to dig in and follow his father's advice, but it was difficult because the thoughts of playing video games were never far from his thoughts.

After his father's death, no one mourned more than Dennis. And, although he was grieving for his loss, Dennis finally felt a freedom that he never enjoyed before. He drove straight from his father's funeral to the electronics store and bought his game system. He became obsessed with playing video games and began to lose interest in school and everything else. Dennis did not feel the joy he thought he would yet he could not stop playing. This section leaves off with the foreshadowing that one night "they" came to visit him.



Level One

Level One Summary

Dennis had been placed on academic probation because of his poor performance, which was due to his obsession with video games. But during his junior year in college, Dennis was told by the dean, Dr. Rodriguez, that he was being suspended from the university. Dr. Rodriguez told him that perhaps the university wasn't a good fit for him and that attending another college would be beneficial. Although he pleaded with the dean, the decision was final and he would have to leave the university.

Dennis was angry and he thought back to when his downfall at the university had begun. It was during his freshman orientation week when he saw his father's face everywhere on campus. He began cutting classes to avoid being traumatized by the constant reminders of his father. So, instead of going to class, he'd stay in his apartment and play games. He lied to his mother telling her that everything was going fine with his studies.

Dennis began hanging out at a video game arcade. His friends admired his amazing skills at game playing. One day at the arcade, a feather floated down near him. He touched it and it gave him a strange sensation. When playing games at a friend's apartment, feathers started to flutter down around him. No one could see the feathers except Dennis. It upset him and he left the game-playing party.

As he walked home, the feathers continued to drop on him. He became angered and shouted to the skies, demanding to know what was going on. Suddenly, four angels appeared to him. One proclaimed that they were bringing his destiny to him. The angels looked like the angels that were on a greeting card his father had given him. The angels told Dennis that he would finish school and would go on to medical school to become a gastroenterologist and that he would be great in his profession. Dennis was sure his guilt was making him imagine the angels. He ignored them and walked away.

The angels went to Dr. Rodriguez's home and appealed to her to re-enroll Dennis. Dr. Rodriguez thought the angels were kids wearing costumes. She told them Halloween wasn't for another six months. Dr. Rodriguez told the angels to get off her property. One of the angels fluttered up above her head and warned her to reconsider. Dr. Rodriguez was terrified.

The next morning Dennis woke up in a pile of feathers. The angels were there and showed him his re-enrollment papers. They had obviously convinced the dean to change her mind. Dennis was grateful that the angels got him back in school. The angels promised to help him when he returned to school. They would do his cooking, cleaning and laundry so he'd have more time to study. But Dennis told them he could handle everything, after all he was 20 years old. But the angels hovered around and saw that he was falling into his old habits and playing video games again.



Dennis vowed he would study but the angels insisted that he give his game system and video games away. His friends tried to talk him out of giving up the games but Dennis was determined to devote himself to school. The angels stayed with him and, as promised, stayed and helped him. It all paid off when Dennis was informed that he had been accepted into medical school. He was forever grateful to the angels.

Level One Analysis

Dennis was in grief during his early college years. He deflected his pain by playing video games non-stop. Instead of honoring his father by doing well in school as his father would have liked, he did just the opposite. He did so poorly in school that he was kicked out in his junior year. He felt remorseful but still felt lost. He didn't know where to turn to and his confusion and guilt manifested in his imagining that angels from heaven had come to rescue him. But he felt so much self-loathing that he thought he was a lost cause. The "angels," who were really his father's spirit speaking to him, told him his destiny was to become a medical doctor which was exactly what his father would have wanted. That was why he gave his son a chemistry set years before instead of a game system.

Dennis finally began to believe in himself again and felt confident that he could make it into medical school and honor the memory of his father. He passed the ultimate test when he gave his game system and video games away to a friend. It was a difficult thing to do, but he did not want to let his father down again. He worked hard and felt the spirit of his father through the presence of the angels who remained to support him.



Level Two

Level Two Summary

Everything seemed perfect when Dennis started med school. The first friend he made there was a female student from India named Ipsha Narang. By becoming a surgeon, Ipsha would be fulfilling a long-held family tradition. Hector Martinez was another classmate who went to high school with Ipsha but they weren't friends then. Hector was a jock and ladies' man in high school. He went to Harvard and flunked out his first semester. He got drunk one night and had a terrible accident. He wound up in a full-body cast and had to live at with his mother for a full year before he could return to school. He seemed to have changed his ways after his experiences.

Cathleen Rhee, known as Kat, knew Hector from their undergraduate days. They both became acquainted with Dennis and Ipsha. When Kat was ten years old, her father's dry cleaning business was held up. Her father was knocked unconscious and she was shot through the stomach. A passerby wearing a leather jacket saved her life and called 911. She never saw the man again but always wore a leather jacket in his honor. Hector never dated Kat because she was a little mannish.

The angels were still helping Dennis at home but he was spending less and less time there and more time with his friends. The angels were afraid he wasn't studying enough and encouraged him to come right home after school. That day in school, the professor announced that the class would begin studies in microbiology. They were each given a specimen container so they could collect a sample of their own fecal matter. Everyone was supposed to bring in their samples the next Monday. The professor even gave detailed instructions on how to collect their samples.

The thought of collecting the sample and the entire process was nauseating Dennis. Ipsha told him that in his chosen field of gastro-enterology, he'd have to get used to such research and experimentation. He went home that night and closed himself in the bathroom for an hour. He attempted to follow the professor's instructions in collecting a sample of his feces. The angels were waiting outside the bathroom, asking if they could help him. They were bugging him and he told them to go away. On that Monday, Dennis, Ipsha, Hector and Kat all brought their samples to class. Testing his sample in class made Dennis so sick that he wound up in the men's room throwing up.

After class, Dennis learned that his mother was in the hospital. The four friends drove over to visit her. She was having numbness in her feet and was diagnosed with diabetes. But his mother was not worried about her own health, all she could say was how proud she was of her son. She told him that his father would be very proud of him, too. He did admit that he didn't like some aspects of med school such as the feces research. His mother encouraged to be strong and see his studies through. Dennis was worried about his mother but his friends assured him that she would be fine because diabetes was a manageable disease.



When he got home from the hospital, he was confronted by the angels. They were angry that he hadn't come home after school. They had looked everywhere for him. He wasn't in the mood for them or to defend his actions. He told the angels he was grateful for what they'd done for him but that they needed to back off. Dennis left and got together with his friends to study for a big test. Dennis and Kat were becoming close which made Ipsha jealous because she had a crush on him. The friends began spending a lot of time together where they were studying, eating meals together, and hanging out. Kat asked him why he wanted to go into gastroenterology since he had such a weak stomach. All he could think of were the angels who had foretold of his "destiny."

Kat didn't understand Dennis when he tried to explain that it was his destiny to become a gastro-enterologist. He explained that at his eighth grade graduation, his father gave him a graduation card that had four angels on it. Inside his father had written, "I'm so proud of you." He used the card as a way to explain how he felt it was his destiny to become a gastroenterologist. The card from his father was lost for a while but it reappeared during his undergraduate years. That's why he looked at gastro-enterology as his destiny. Kat didn't buy it. Kat told him he didn't have to pursue the career his father wanted him to have and that he should have the career he wanted to have. He should choose his own destiny. Kat's words lingered in Dennis' mind for days.

Dennis talked to the angels and told them that he was thinking about looking into different specialties—like ophthalmology and radiology. It angered the angels who still insisted that gastro-enterology was his destiny. The angels were afraid he was losing his ability to endure. Dennis was having a lot of confused thoughts. He thought of choking the angels and beating them up. He thought of his father and the card he got from him that started all his problems with the angels.

At school, the class had moved on to working with corpses. Kat was surprised that it didn't bother Dennis to work with cadavers. Maybe he should be a surgeon she told him. He still insisted that it was his destiny to specialize in gastro-enterology. Kat insisted that he should grow a backbone and make his own decisions. Ipsha got upset with Kat and told her to shut her "big mouth." Ipsha was embarrassed by her own behavior and ran crying from the room. Dennis followed but didn't understand when she explained that it was difficult for her to be around Kat and him. Ipsha said it was irrelevant but that he shouldn't listen to Kat. What a person's family wants and expects of a child is important. Everything a person became originated from his family.

After the incident, Ipsha stopped coming to study with the others. Hector stopped coming, too, because he couldn't concentrate on his studies. Without openly saying anything, soon Kat and Dennis stopped studying together as well. Dennis began staying home which thrilled the angels who felt he had gotten his endurance back. They did everything the could do to support his studies. Dennis became a solitary figure and only attended class, listened to music and studied at home with the angels. He felt lonely and one day on the way home, feathers began dropping down on him again.



At school, the students were being required to conduct prostate exams on men who had volunteered to be test subjects. Apparently, Dennis did not have a good technique. The man he examined complained about him being rough. He was sent to a clinic so he could have more practice. But the results were the same and he was too rough with his patients during prostate exams and they complained about him.

Dennis ran into an old friend from high school named Takeem who was with some cute girls. He showed Dennis a trophy he won from a video game tournament. Takeem told Dennis that he was earning a living writing reviews for video games and for testing out new games. Dennis was very impressed with Takeem's lifestyle. Dennis "talked" to his father. He accused him of sending the angels after he died to convince him what the future held for him without giving him the opportunity to discuss it with him. Dennis was very upset and sad about his future.

Level Two Analysis

At first Dennis found everything perfect at med school. He met a diverse group of fellow classmates. A girl from India was fulfilling her family tradition by becoming a surgeon. She was satisfied with complying with her family's wishes that she follow in their footsteps. Kat was a more independent person. She thought Dennis should make his own decisions and not get caught up with what his parents wanted him to become. Hector was a former athlete and playboy who learned to become a more serious student after flunking out of Harvard and becoming involved in a car accident in which he was seriously injured.

Dennis was turned off by some aspects of specializing in gastroenterology which the angels, speaking for his father, told him was what he was meant for. Dennis became very confused between the different influences in his life. One friend told him to follow his parents' wishes, another told him to break away, and the third was a living example of living a cautious life. His mother was proud of him and told him how pleased his father would be that he was going to specialize in gastroenterology, which was another pressure on him. Then he had the pressure of the angels who became angry if he dared even discuss another medical specialty. He had so many influences that he failed to listen to the most important one of all: his own feelings on the matter.

Dennis was discovering that there were two good reasons not to pursue a career in gastroenterology. It didn't appeal to him and he apparently did not have the natural skill that it required. It was only outside pressures and his concern about disappointing his mother and failing to honor his father's memory that kept it as his goal. He was staying in the field for the wrong reasons.

Dennis' potential relapse into video game playing was foreshadowed when he ran into an old high school friend who was winning trophies, getting the girls and receiving awards for his video game playing abilities. Dennis was impressed with his old friends' lifestyle that was ostensibly ideal. Dennis became bitter, accusing his father of sending angels to do his bidding. When he was alive, he failed to have a conversation with



Dennis about what he wanted to do with his life. His father did not give Dennis credit for being able to make decisions on his own. Dennis saw his father as controlling and although he wanted to honor his memory, Dennis was beginning to realize that he had to carve out the future he wanted—not what someone else wanted and that it was possible to honor your family while at the same time make your own decisions.



Level 3

Level 3 Summary

Dennis decided that med school was not for him. He didn't look forward to telling the angels but he had to level with them. But it wasn't easy and he had a hard time getting the words out. When he arrived, the angels were doing their usual thing of cleaning, sweeping and dusting. When he finally said, "I quit," the angels continued to go about their business, pretending they hadn't heard what Dennis said. But Dennis was determined to have the confrontation with the angels and tell them where he stood. He raised his voice and told them to pay attention to him. He began by acknowledging how much they had done for him and that he appreciated every single thing they did for him. He enjoyed every dinner they cooked and was grateful for every shirt they washed. The angels reminded him that they also made flash cards for him to help in study. But bottom line, he told them, medical school was not for him. It was, after all, not his destiny. Dennis was very honest with them. He told them that having to go along with them against his will by accepting that gastroenterology was in his future, had placed a lot of pressure on him and he was tired of the pretence. He told the angels that they were right when they thought at different times, that he didn't have what it took to be a medical doctor. He did not have the necessary endurance.

The angels were at first silent. They did not react initially. But it didn't take long before one spoke up and shouted that Dennis was grounded. Of course, Dennis didn't take to that very well. But the angel suddenly turned into a red-faced flying devil. He had long sharp teeth and a menacing look on his face. He shouted even louder that Dennis was grounded. In fact, he yelled so loudly that it literally knocked Dennis over. The angel ordered Dennis to go to his room and study and to not come out until the angels told him he could.

The power of the angel's anger was so strong that it blew him, along with some feathers, into his room. He was stunned by what had occurred. But as he sat at his desk and looked at his textbooks, he realized that as a twenty-three year-old medical school drop-out he wasn't about to let a group of crazy angels ground him and force him to study. Dennis was so upset that he escaped from his room by crawling out the window. But soon the angels were after him. He kept running. In fact, he ran right past a restaurant where Hector and Kat were meeting.

Dennis ran down the middle of the street with the angels still on his trail. As he ran, he realized that he was running through a maze just like in the Pac-Man game. He was like the yellow Pac-Man character and they were like the ghosts, Pac-Man adversaries in the game. He stopped and confronted them, telling them that they weren't angels and that they were actually ghosts. The ghosts admitted that they were not angels and insisted that he follow his destiny. In response, Dennis, just like Pac-Man, decided that he had to chomp them. He picked up the orange ghost and bit him. A vision of his father as young man came to him.



In the vision, Dennis understood that his father had promised his father on his deathbed that he would become a doctor. The ghosts were the promises that his father had broken to his own father. Trying to force Dennis to fulfill his own destiny was his way of making it up to Dennis' grandfather. Dennis then ate the rest of the ghosts after which he had another vision. His father had promised his grandmother when she was ill that he would become a doctor and discover a cure for the disease she had. Another broken promise! His father then came to him in a vision. His father admitted that he was trying to make Dennis into a better person than he was. His father explained that he had tried to study medicine but since English was a new language to him he was having difficulty with the terms. He apologized for all the problems he had caused Dennis.

With all these new revelations, Dennis was confused and conflicted. He was having a difficult time breathing and had a shallow heart beat. He passed out and the next thing he knew, he was in the hospital. Hector and Kat had followed him when they saw him run by the restaurant. Luckily, Hector caught Dennis just as he was falling and took him to the emergency room. He was moaning about being a yellow man who was being chased by ghosts. His friends thought he was having a psychotic breakdown. Ishaq joined Kat and Hector at his bedside. When he woke he told them he was quitting medical school.

Dennis went to Takeem's house the next day and began playing video games again. He began playing regularly and became quite skilled. He got a part-time job as a game tester and started to compete in tournaments. Within the next year, he won three competitions. Dennis was living the life he had longed to live but he wasn't happy.

Dennis stopped by the electronics store and the store clerk who checked him out was one of the men he had examined for prostate disease in medical school. The man was grateful because Dennis had discovered that he had a disease. The man sought treatment and was cured thanks to Dennis' discovery. Dennis talked to his mother about his father's dream to be a doctor. She told him that he gave up his dream when Dennis was born because he had a child to support. His mother made it clear that his father never regretted giving up his career for the sake of his son. Dennis went to an arcade and was playing Ghost Squad. A little boy was admiring his play and commented on how many people Dennis was saving by killing off the ghosts. The little boy's words struck him. He realized he was saving lives—but none of them were real. He gave the little boy a jacket he won at a tournament and left the arcade.

Level 3 Analysis

After Dennis had a confrontation with the angels, he realized that they were not angels at all. In fact, they were more like the ghosts in the Pac-Man arcade game. In a series of visions, he realized that the ghosts were actually the broken promises that his father had made to his father. He promised his father that he would become a doctor but failed to live up to his vow. His father was trying to make it up to his own father, by forcing his son to fulfill the promises he made to Dennis' grandfather. His father lived with guilt all his life and instead of discussing Dennis' future with him and allowing him to decide



what career to pursue, his father was tangled up in his own guilt about disappointing his parents and breaking his promises. Once Dennis realized that the angels were really the ghost of broken promises, he was able to make them disappear from his life.

Dennis felt the spirit of his father and that he had his blessing to quit medical school. He then pursued his own dreams and returned to video game playing. He became very skilled at games and got a job as a game tester. Over the next year he won tournaments. Dennis was finally living his own dream but it was an empty dream and was not making him happy. There was something else out there for Dennis. He just had to discover what it was.

When Dennis was at an electronics store, he ran into one of the men he examined at school. The man was grateful to him because during the exam, Dennis apparently discovered that the man had a disease. The man had surgery and was cured. If it hadn't been for Dennis's careful exam, the man would not have lived. This incident foreshadows the strong possibility that perhaps Dennis was "destined" to have a career as a physician after all.

The chapter ends with Dennis playing a game called "Ghost Squad." He is killing ghosts in the game and saving the lives of the people. The sequence is symbolic of the fact that playing video games is not really taking part in life. He was saving fictitious people in the game. Perhaps he needed to apply his skills to save real people. By handing off a jacket he won in a competition to a young boy, he was saying good-bye to his childhood.

Game Over

Game Over Summary

By the next fall, Dennis was back in medical school. He ran into Ipsha and found out that she was studying together again with Kat and Hector. Ipsha told Dennis to give her a call later. Dennis met with one of the professors who asked if he had decided to pursue gastro-enterology again. Dennis did not commit. He told the doctor he was keeping his options open. The doctor showed him how to perform a colonoscopy. His professor showed Dennis how a camera was inserted in the patient so that the doctors could see the inside of the colon without having to perform surgery. When a polyp was detected, it could be removed right then during the process. He allowed Dennis to manipulate the camera through the colon. He asked if Dennis had done the procedure before.

Game Over Analysis

Dennis had reconciled with his past. And after Dennis finally felt free to make his own decisions, he felt free to return to medical school because it was of his own choosing. Although he had decided that he would become a doctor, he had not yet decided what field he would pursue which would allow him to conduct his studies without undue pressure. His game-playing experience could prove to be a useful skill in conducting a colonoscopy. Guiding the camera through the patient's colon was just like using a joystick.



Characters

Dennis Ouyang

Dennis Ouyang was only an eight-year-old boy when he became enchanted with video games. His parents were strict and didn't give him any money to play at the arcade. But that didn't stop him from worshipping PAC-MAN and Super Mario Brothers. Although he was grief-stricken, the first thing Dennis did after his father died was to purchase a video game system.

Dennis was so obsessed with video games that he was suspended from college in his junior year. In college, "angels" came to see him and revealed to him that it was his destiny to be a doctor. The angels represented the hopes, wishes, broken promises of his father who had failed to become a doctor like his father wanted him to do. Dennis was plagued by these angels who constantly berated him to study more and have more "endurance."

Eventually, Dennis found his way to the freedom to make his own decisions. He confronted the angels and defeated them when he told them they were merely his father's disappointment over his own broken promises. When Dennis was finally able to be his own man and make his own decisions, he eventually decided to go to medical school. He had matured and had reconciled with his father's guilt and finally left his childhood and game-playing days behind him.

Mr. Ouyang, Dennis' Father

It was Mr. Ouyang who was adamant that young Dennis not receive a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas. Rather, he saw to it that Dennis received a chemistry set which would help prepare him for a career as a physician. Mr. Ouyang worked hard and had to "eat much bitterness," to provide a good living for his family. He did not believe that his hard-earned money should be wasted on playing mindless game-playing.

Mr. Ouyang died just after Dennis graduated from high school. Dennis was grief-stricken but one of the first things he did was buy a game-playing system. When mysterious "angels" visited Dennis to encourage him to go to medical school, he felt pressure to venture into something he wasn't sure he wanted to do. Eventually, he learned that the visitors weren't angels at all. They represented the disappointments and broken dreams of his father who had failed to become a doctor like his father wanted him to do. Mr. Ouyang apologized to Dennis in one of his visions. Mr. Ouyang was sorry that by acting out of his own guilt, he had put so much pressure on his son and tried to force him to enter into a career that he really didn't want. He was sorry that he hadn't discussed it with him when he was alive so that Dennis would have had the chance to express his own opinions about his future.



Mrs. Ouyang, Dennis' Mother

Mrs. Ouyang wanted Dennis to become a doctor. She would be proud of him and it would be a great honor to his late father. She eventually accepted Dennis' decision to drop out of medical school.

Ishap Narang

Ishap Narang was a fellow med student at Dennis' university. She came from a family with a long line of surgeons. She did not feel pressure to become a surgeon. She felt it was an honor to herself and her family.

Cathleen Rhee

Cathleen Rhee, also known as Kat, was Dennis' classmate at med school. Her father's cleaners was robbed when she was young and was shot during the robbery.

Hector Martinez

Hector Martinez was Dennis' classmate at med school. He flunked out at Harvard University as an undergraduate. He was an athlete and playboy but changed his ways after a serious accident.

The Angels

Four angels visited Dennis to deliver the news that it was his destiny to become a gastroenterologist. Later, Dennis learned that they were angels at all but the symbols of his father's broken promises.

Dr. Rodriguez

Dr. Rodriguez was the dean of Dennis' undergraduate college. She gave him the news that he was being suspended permanently in his junior year because of his poor performance.

Takeem

Takeem was a game-playing friend of Dennis. Takeem was living the lifestyle that Dennis aspired to. Takeem won gaming competitions, got the cute girls, and made money with a job in the gaming industry.

Dennis' Grandfather

Dennis' father had made the promise to his dying father that he would become a doctor. He failed to keep his vow and later put pressure on his son to live up to that dream.



Objects/Places

Chinese Restaurant

The first time Dennis saw a video game was in a Chinese restaurant where he had his first experience with gaming that would eventually become an obsession.

Nintendo Entertainment System

Dennis wanted a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas. He was disappointed when he got a chemistry set instead.

Pac-Man

The first video game that Dennis ever saw was Pac-Man. Later, he related to it personally when he was visited by angels that turned out to be "ghosts" like Pac-Man's adversaries in the game.

Med School

Dennis was accepted into medical school. It was where he met three good friends who became important in his life.

Video Arcade

As a little boy, Dennis could only watch others play video games. As an adult, he spent many hours at video arcades.

Dennis' Apartment

Dennis lived in an apartment when he went to medical school. The angels who visited him stayed in the apartment to clean and cook for Dennis so he could dedicate his time to his studies.

Undergraduate School

Dennis was suspended from his undergraduate school in his junior year due to his low grades, which were caused by his obsession with game-playing.



Street Maze

Dennis felt like he was in a Pac-Man game when he was running down a maze of streets trying to escape the ghosts who were chasing him.

Hospital

Dennis became so upset with the angels that he ran away from them and became physically exhausted. He collapsed on the street and was taken to the hospital by his friends.

Gastro-enterology

The angels who visited Dennis delivered the news that it was his destiny to enter into gastroenterology, which was a field which he initially was not interested in.



Themes

Guilt

The "angels" that visited Dennis to convince him that his destiny was to be a doctor of gastroenterology, were symbolic of the guilt that Dennis' father felt about his own relationship with his father. When he was a young man, his father lay dying. Dennis's grandfather, wanted his son, Dennis's father, to be a physician. Dennis' father promised his father on his deathbed that he would become a doctor. However, English was not his first language and he found it difficult to understand the medical terms. He also was a new father and needed to earn a good living to support his family. He, therefore, felt compelled to leave medical school and thus break his vow to his father.

Dennis' father struggled for the rest of his life with the guilt he felt for not living up to his promise. It was this guilt that led him to pressure his own son to become a doctor. By so doing, he felt he could compensate for his inability to keep the vow he made to his father. He passed the guilt on down to his son who felt forced to attend medical school because his late father had wanted him to be a doctor. When he was on the verge of dropping out of college altogether, his father "sent" the angels" to Dennis to put more pressure on him to attend medical school so that his own guilt could be eased.

Cultural Influences

"Level Up" is the story of an Asian-American boy who became obsessed with video game-playing. When he was a young boy, he was the only one among his peers who was not allowed to have money to play video games. It was a tradition among the Chinese culture to work hard and "eat much bitterness" during life. To Dennis' mother and father it was frivolous to waste money on playing video games. Not being able to join in with his friends in after-school game-playing was probably difficult for the young boy which could have led to his obsession.

It was also a tradition in Chinese culture to honor the wishes of family elders. Dennis' father felt like a failure much of his life because he failed to keep the promise to his father to become a doctor. Dennis' father transferred the guilt he felt over his failure to his own son who he pressured to become a doctor. When all the other kids were getting Nintendo Entertainment systems for Christmas, Dennis received a chemistry set. Had Dennis and his family lived in China rather than in America, he may not have felt that he was being treated so unfairly; but living in another culture, the difference in how his parents treated him as compared to his friends was stark.

Ishap, Dennis' friend in med school, was from an East Indian family. There was a long tradition of young people becoming surgeons in her family. She was expected to do the same. But unlike Dennis, Ishap felt happy to live up to that tradition. It was an element of her life and family that she embraced and felt proud of. And although it could be



argued that Ishop was influenced or pressured by her culture, she did not reject it or feel she was being mistreated.

The Maturation Process

The story of Dennis Ouyang in "Level Up," started with his life at the age of eight and onwards. His parents were very controlling and focused all their attention on their only child. They did not allow him to feel free to make some of his own choices as he was maturing—which resulted in the stunting of his maturation process. Dennis did not learn to make his own decisions as a youngster and as he matured, he had not gained the confidence to do so as he became a young adult.

Dennis lived under such strict living conditions that when his father died, he finally felt free to pursue some of the "fun" things that he had missed as a youngster when his father was grooming him to be a physician. When he finally had a taste of the freedom to make his own decisions, he went overboard and made some bad choices. Making wrong decisions is a part of the maturation process. However, someone like Dennis who had never been allowed to speak his mind and make choices as a youngster, went "wild" when he finally was afforded that chance.

Dennis made the decision to quit medical school and lived an entire year as a game-player. He enjoyed certain aspects of it and loved the freedom, but he realized it was not a fulfilling life. What was important was that he learned that lesson on his own. He then was mature enough to finally leave his childhood behind and made the decision to return to medical school.

Style

Point of View

The story of Dennis Ouyang in "Level Up," is written in the limited third-person and omniscient point of view. The author, Gene Luen Yang, is an Asian-American. By having personal knowledge of the Asian culture, Yang is able to depict the impact that the rather stringent and traditional culture can have on its youth, especially for those living in America who see the sharp difference in their lifestyle compared to that of most of their peers. In that sense, there may be an autobiographical element to the story of Dennis.

By portraying the Asian parents as strict and no-nonsense in their demeanor who felt that they must "eat bitterness" in order to be ready for life, the figure of Dennis is a sympathetic one. Dennis struggles between pleasing his mother and father and fitting in with his peers. Eight-year-old Dennis visits at an arcade with no money while the other kids are busy enjoying their games. This illustrates the sharp difference of his existence—and perhaps other young Asian-Americans—who struggle between cultures. Yang writes Dennis' experience as a coming-of-age story but also deals with the challenge children face when they are caught in the cross-fire of two somewhat diverse cultures.

Dennis' maturation was stunted by controlling parents, which is something that many young people of all cultures can relate to. The obsession with video games is another familiar theme to many youngsters, especially boys. The book is targeted to teens and young adults.

Setting

"Level Up," the coming-of-age story of Dennis Ouyang, takes place in an unnamed city in America. Dennis became enraptured with video games when he first saw one in the lobby of a Chinese restaurant when he was eight-years-old. As a youngster, he went way out of his way coming home from school so he could stop by the convenience store and watch the other kids play video games. A short while after Dennis graduated from high school, his father died. After grieving at the funeral parlor, he immediately drove to the nearest electronics store and bought a gaming system.

As a junior at an unnamed university, Dennis was told by the dean that he was suspended from the college because of his poor performance. His bad grades were due to his obsession with game-playing. He lived in an apartment which he wound up sharing with four "angels" who came to help him through medical school. In medical school, his class was studying microbiology. He was repulsed by some of the research he was required to do there.

After he dropped out of medical school, he became a full-time gamer and spent the majority of his time at arcades. He also entered competitions and became involved in



other aspects of the gaming world. When he realized that his lifestyle was an empty one, he made the decision to return to medical school.

Language and Meaning

In "Level Up," there are many references to video games and gaming systems. Pac-Man was the first video game that Dennis Ouyang had ever seen. That's when his obsession with game-playing began. References were also made to the Super Mario Brothers video game. Dennis dropped hints all around the house that he wanted a Nintendo Entertainment System for Christmas. Instead, his strict and conservative parents gave him a chemistry set as a way to begin grooming him for a medical career. The name of the book, "Level Up," refers to the levels of a video game as a player successful advances from one level to the next. Instead of chapter names and numbers, the book is set up in "levels."

There are also many references to the Chinese culture in the book since an element of the story surrounds the issue of the struggle that the youth of one culture has when they live in a society that is dominated by another culture. The author contrasts the American culture as liberal and free to the Asian-American culture, which is more structured and tied to tradition and one that places great importance on the wishes of elders.

Structure

"Level Up," written by Gene Luen Yang, with artwork by Thien Pham, is structured in the style of a comic strip or graphic novel. The book is also laid out in the style of a video game. The "introduction" of the book is entitled, "Press Start to Begin." Subsequent chapters have the following titles" "Level 1," Level 2," "Level 3," and, finally, "Game Over," which has a sub-title of "Play Again - Yes or No." The story by Yang is told in traditional comic strip style with the words of the characters written in balloons over their heads. The book is comprised of slick, high-grade paper which adds to the graphic novel feel of the book.

The attractive illustrations by Pham help to tell the story. They cartoon-like figures give life and expression to the story of the video-obsessed youngster. The illustrations are tasteful and done in pleasingly muted tones. Pham is a comic book artist who also illustrated the graphic novel, Sumo.

The structure of the book is clever in that the chapters are called "levels" which ties in with the one of the main aspects of the story which is the youngster's obsession with video-game playing. The book begins with "Press Start to Begin," which describes Dennis' younger years and early attraction to games and ends with a chapter called "Game Over," which describes a mature Dennis who finally leaves his childhood and video-gaming behind.

Quotes

"A saw my first arcade video game when I was six." (Introduction, p. 7).

"That is the single most amazing thing I've ever heard." (Introduction, p. 9).

"To provide that boy with the life he has, I've had to eat much bitterness. He must learn to do the same." (Introduction, p. 13).

"Tell me 'going nuts' is a stage of grieving." (Chapter 1, p. 24).

"You know, the best thing about video games is you never have to worry about what you're supposed to do." (Chapter 1, p. 55).

"On the morning of my first day at med school, everything was beautiful." (Chapter 2, p. 61).

"You are an orphan now, and I am a widow. We must learn to eat bitterness on our own. Father is no longer here to eat it for us." (Chapter 2, p. 82).

"I knew exactly what I was going to say and how I was going to say it. It was my life. I wanted it back." (Chapter 3, p. 113).

"A happier man is a better man!" (Chapter 3, p. 135).

"I was finally living the life I'd always wanted, but then why wasn't I happy?" (Chapter 3, p. 139).

"We do not regret the sacrifices we make for others, Dennis. Not ever!" (Chapter 3, p. 146).

"Perfect play on the first level nets fourteen hostages. The only problem is - none of those lives are real." (Chapter 3, p. 149).

Topics for Discussion

Where does Dennis see his first video game? What game was it?

Why isn't Dennis allowed to play video games like his friends? How does that impact him?

How does Dennis let his parents know he wants a game-playing system for Christmas? What game system was it? What did he get instead?

Why is Dennis suspended from college? What does he tell his mother?

Who were the "angels" who visit Dennis? What did they really represent?

What mistakes did Dennis' father make in his relationship with Dennis? How does Dennis realize that his father has regrets about their relationship?

Why does Dennis leave medical school? What does he do for the year he's away from school? What makes Dennis decide to return to medical school?