

# JOSH BAXTER LEVELS UP

WRITTEN BY  
GAVIN BROWN



Scholastic Press  
New York

Copyright © 2016 by Gavin Brown

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Gavin 1983- author.

Josh Baxter levels up / by Gavin Brown.—First edition.

pages cm

**Summary:** Because his family has moved again, Josh Baxter is starting at a new school for the third time in two years, and this time he has really started off on the wrong foot—but when his mother takes away the video games that have become his refuge because of his poor grades, Josh realizes he has to come up with a new strategy for success.

ISBN 978-0-545-77294-5

1. Moving, Household—Juvenile fiction. 2. Middle schools—Juvenile fiction. 3. Families—Juvenile fiction. 4. Video games—Juvenile fiction. 5. Bullying—Juvenile fiction. [1. Moving, Household—Fiction. 2. Middle schools—Fiction. 3. Schools—Fiction. 4. Family life—Fiction. 5. Video games—Fiction. 6. Bullying—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.I.B795Jo 2016

813.6—dc23

[Fic]

2015016236

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, March 2016

Book design by Christopher Stengel

## CHAPTER

# 1

## ***THAT NEW GAME SMELL***

The school bus is a loading screen for my new life, the empty space in a video game between challenges. I sit by the window, wondering what's on the next level and watching the other kids get on the bus. My new classmates are wearing the kinds of clothes I thought only people on TV wore, back before we moved to a big-city suburb.

Mom said I couldn't bring my handheld on the first day of school, because I should make friends and not "be glued to that thing the whole day." So I spend the ride imagining myself running along beside the bus, backflipping over the road signs and vaulting over mailboxes. The landscape I'm Mario-ing my way through is home, at least for now. New town, new house, new school. And no player's guide to give me the tips and tricks I need to make it through the year. This is one game I have to figure out how to beat on my own.

Mom says she was lucky that a job offer came in as the company went under. It doesn't feel so lucky to me, having to move *again* during what should have been the first

week of school. So for the third time in two years, I'm the new kid. This time, my sister Lindsay and I are showing up after everyone has already settled in.

The bus pulls into the school parking lot and I see the next challenge that Mom's forced on me. Howard Taft Middle School, three times the size of any of my old schools. Gym, classrooms, science labs, auditorium, library—and three hundred kids in my grade. I stand up with the other kids and shuffle forward as my heart starts banging like the drum track for a boss battle.

The loading screen is over. It's game on.

Yesterday afternoon I came to school, met with the guidance counselor, and got my class schedule, a map, and a flier about school spirit. As starting inventories go, it's pretty pathetic. Couldn't I at least get a rusty sword or a mysterious ancient artifact?

Before I know it I'm staring into the depths of my locker: Vault 151. Base of operations. Today my vault holds only the books, pencils, and binders that I brought with me—but with the right gear, an adventurer can accomplish anything. I close the door. I'll just have to find grappling hooks, spell scrolls, and health potions along the way. Or maybe an enchanted hammer. I'm not picky.

I take three steps down the hallway before I realize I've forgotten one key thing: Vault Security. A total noob mistake. I go back and pull out my shiny new lock.

As it clicks shut, someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn around. The girl is a punk princess, with streaks of

blue in her hair and a black outfit with more flaps and rivets than I can count. Back in my old school, the only thing that distinguished groups of kids was whether your shirt was of a band, a sports team, or a video game. Between this girl and the kids on the bus, I can't be more out of my element with my messy brown hair that hasn't been cut since ancient times, my thick-rimmed glasses, and my favorite T-shirt—Link from Legend of Zelda holding his bow and leading Robin Hood's merry men out of Sherwood Forest. Even the shirt, as much as I love it, is starting to get too small.

“Hi, I'm Maya,” she says.

“Um, hi, I'm Josh,” I answer. A couple of her friends are watching from down the hall.

She points at my lock. “I... think you just put your lock on my locker.”

“No, this is mine, it's 151.”

She raises an eyebrow and points to the number above the locker that I've bolted shut: 153. I feel like even more of a noob than before. In my rush to secure the vault, I've snapped my lock on the wrong door.

I grab the lock with my left hand and stare at it. The other day I committed the combination to memory and destroyed the paper, secret agent style.

“I, uh...” My brain shuts down, like a glitchy game that freezes just before a crucial moment.

If only I had the ability to figure out the combination by listening as I spun the dial, or casting an opening spell. But that takes years of wizard school, and all I've learned

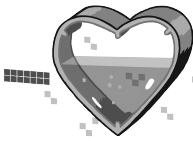
in the last couple years are the key dates of the Revolutionary War and how to reduce fractions and—

The bell rings. I glance at the Punk Princess.

“Seriously? You forgot the combination?” Maya rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know . . . should we . . .” My voice trails off.

“Great, now I’m going to be late.” Maya sighs. “Wait here.”



As she walks away, I notice that her backpack has a patch with a punk Princess Daisy on it. I want to say how cool it is, but what’s the point? She already hates me.

Kids head to their homerooms and the hallways empty out. Maya comes back with the guidance counselor, Mr. Alpert, in tow. Mom and I met with him yesterday for my quick orientation. He has platinum blond hair and pale skin, and is about nine feet tall. Or something. I’m not so good at estimating the height of things that high up. I can’t help thinking he’s some kind of frost giant trying to pass as a human.

“Don’t worry, Josh, the janitor’s coming to cut it off,” Mr. Alpert says. “I was looking for you anyway, to make sure you got to your first class.” For a huge guy, he has this tiny, tiny voice, like he’s afraid if he speaks too loudly he’ll break something. And I can see why he had a hard time finding me—we must all look like ants to him.

I keep looking down at my sneakers, hoping that this will all be over soon.