

“Video games won’t help you in your future - do something more productive with your life!” is a statement that many gamers like I have encountered during our computer sessions whether it be from our parents, the little voice in our head, or those around us, such as in the case of Zack Lightman, a soon-to-be high school graduate that finds out that this string of words might not be as truthful as many find it to be.

After having played the smash success Armada by developer Chaos Terrain for years and rising to the top ten, IronBeagle (his username) finds himself spiralling down the rabbit hole of government conspiracies and finds that these games were programmed for the sole purpose of gathering and preparing recruits for Earth’s Last Stand - an alien invasion threatening to eradicate the world as an act of retaliation on humankind.

Throughout this interstellar journey Ernest Cline, better known for his film-adapted Ready Player One, once again fills the novel chock-a-block with nerdy pop culture references, from the discrete video game store safe combo being a callback to George Lucas’ film THX-1138, to the not so discrete “THE CAKE IS A LIE” graffiti markings at the main gang’s headquarters.

Yet, video game and film references are only the tips of the iceberg in terms of the writer’s literary inclusions. The most prominent, and the one that I will discuss further below is his use of convention reversal, meaning that common tropes in science fiction and adventure are all flipped on their heads, providing a fresh and eye-opening take on the genres as a whole - the two more prominent of which revolve around the concept of alien invasion itself.

NOTE: The following section contains spoilers for the novel, reading the book before proceeding is recommended

Compared to other films and works of writing that involve the third kind such as E.T, War Of The Worlds, Alien, Predator, and many others, Cline mashes up the strategies of war and the desire to maintain the lives of the soldiers along with the newly introduced technologies of droids and drones in the 21st century, to create an opposition that controls unmanned battleships from a distance rather than putting their lives at stake - a strategy that has not been seen amidst the tentacle-ridden and viscous bloodlust-fuelled extraterrestrials’ plans, placing a modern perspective in the eyes of the reader that contrasts the kamikaze runs of the past.

The same ‘modern perspective’ can be applied to the approach taken by us homo sapiens; rather than calling up the militaries of each country and having them gather in a single location (which oddly always appear to be either America or Japan in popular fiction), or deciding to “nuke them all” in the not-so-wise words of Alan Jonah from Godzilla: King Of The Monsters, the recruitment process is through gathering regular citizens across the world that have an upper hand at a certain video game that the government published, gathering data through the process of entertaining humans for years. This logical process of giving citizens the required training needed from the comforts of their home, and then placing them in an artificial situation identical to the real counterpart culminate into a more realistic through-line in terms of the plot and details, making Armada much more relatable to the public, and different within the labyrinth of sci-fi novels.

One more convention that is turned upside down concerns the “grand reveal of the evil lord behind the scenes”. Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader from Star Wars III & VI, Wheatley from

Portal 2, Elijah Price from Unbreakable, these people were all revealed to be not who they seemed in the final few moments of their respective series, sending shockwaves through nerd culture and standing out from many other competitors at the time.

This novel jumps onto that bandwagon with the twist that rather than having a character suddenly revealed to be the villain, there is no villain at all and rather what the soldiers were fighting against were clones of themselves, and that the “attack that had raged for decades” was simply a test made by a council of alien colonies to judge whether Earth was ready for contact with the third kind - an idea which itself is explored to fruition and explained in a satisfying epilogue.

Piecing together these reversed expectations set in place by Cline, as well as adding dosages of nerd culture that have made a smile creep onto my face more than once while reading it, this book has managed to capture modern life in the video gamer’s world as well as it captured future life in Ready Player One, making two successfully delightful reads for two in Ernest Cline’s arsenal - one which I will certainly be following if and when new books get published.