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Ms. Fargo

Identity Supplementary Reading

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Zackary Lightman is your not-so-average 18-year-old boy who lives in Beaverton, Oregon. Zack lives alone with his mother, Pamela Lightman, since his father, Xavier Ulysses Lightman, died in a suspicious explosion. Zack never cared for reality; instead, he prefers living his life in science-fiction movies, books, and videogames. Often, Zack finds himself wishing for some impossible world-changing event would happen, he wants to escape his life of being bullied at high school. One day Zack is staring out the window to his school building, hoping for a world-changing event. He doesn't believe his eyes when he spots a UFO. He is sure that he is hallucinating—especially because the alien vessel he sees darting around in the sky is the same one shown in his favorite video game, *Armada*. *Armada* is a video game in which the players are struggling to save Earth from an alien invasion. *Armada* is a Virtual Reality simulation where the player fights off an alien race called the Sobrukai. Zack is ranked in the top ten leaderboards in *Armada* (more specifically, 6th place!). This is especially impressive because *Armada* is a game filled with millions of players worldwide. As time goes on, life remains the same for Zack, except for thinking he may be losing his mind after seeing the alien ship. One day while Zack is working at Starbase Ace, a used video game store, his boss Ray gives him an early high school graduation gift, a brand-new controller to play *Armada*. As soon as Zack gets home, he tries out his new controller on a new mission. The objective in this mission is easier said than done; Zack and dozens of other players have to escort what appears to be a giant laser cannon, the Icebreaker, to the Sobrukai homeworld and destroy it before their

Armada reaches Earth. Unfortunately, Zack and the other drone pilots in *Armada* were unable to protect Earth from the alien invaders. After Zack logs off, he thinks back to the UFO he saw earlier, concerned about his mental health. Later on in the book, Zack realizes that he was not hallucinating- an enormous spaceship lands right in front of his school. Zack can't believe his eyes when he sees the vessel; it too was from *Armada*! It even had the "fake" secret government organization name, the Earth Defence Alliance (EDA), which was helping humanity fight off the Sobrukai!

Zack is speechless when he sees Ray (his boss) walk out of the spaceship. Ray invites Zack to join him on his flight to a top-secret base in Nebraska. Zack agrees, surprised as he boards the EDA' spaceship and zooms off to Nebraska at a dizzying speed- without the dizziness. Once Zack arrives in Nebraska, he learns that *Armada* is a simulation game created by the government to secretly train drone pilots to fight against a real alien race threatening to exterminate all human life. The threat is an armada of aliens from one of Jupiter's moons, Europa, hence their name; the Europans (not to be confused with Europeans). What will happen to Zack? Will Earth survive? Read [*Armada* by Ernest Cline](#) to find out!

This story follows a teenager who is unknowingly being trained by the government to fight aliens. The key concept is the responsibility of the government to be honest with its citizens. From my perspective, it's easy to understand why the government would not be honest. The government did not want to scare the public with the knowledge they had of aliens, and at the same time, wanted to ensure they had qualified fighters when the time came to defend their citizens. I asked a veteran if it was ever okay if the government was not truthful, he told me that sometimes they had to be because the government could inadvertently harm them when they were in the field.

Interestingly, Zack did not seem to feel betrayed by the government, but rather like a soldier who felt he had a job to do and had confidence in his ability to do it, much like how I would imagine the veteran I talked with to be like. This led me to a question I have always had; Does the technology of present-day video games come from military simulations? I've wondered because I am always on the search for non-violent games. Still, most are violent, and the goal is usually to kill the enemy. I did a little research and found out something interesting!

According to Hamza Shaban who writes in the technology section of *The Atlantic*; "...since the years after World War II, when the army and commercialized gaming built a collaborative relationship, a kind of military-entertainment complex. It still lives: The military offers funding and technical expertise to game and computer developers, and, in exchange, they give it proprietary technology and technical consulting. ... 'the armed forces took the lead in financing, sponsoring, and inventing the specific technology used in video games.' *Spacewar!*, the title historians consider the first video game, was developed by graduate students at MIT who were funded by the Pentagon. "

Today many people play online games. All you have to do is start a casual conversation with someone, and before you know it, you find out if they are not a gamer, then they probably play games here and there. The medium offers to play with people from the comfort of your own home, which other media do not provide. Online games are popular because they are accessible to almost any audience, they have extensive choices in the genre, they are pretty affordable, they are suitable for beginners yet challenging to master, and lastly the variety of opponents-- from your close friends to millions of people you have never met all over the world. In the book, Zack made friends with people who were stationed on the dark side of the moon! It seems odd to me that playing violent games focused on killing an enemy can actually bring people together across the world and eventually maybe space.

In *Armada*, there are two main heroes, Zack and his father, Xavier. They are heroes because (Spoiler alert!) Xavier sacrifices his own life to save humanity, and Zack is a peace-maker with the Europeans, unlike *Lord of the Flies*, where none of the boys seem to reach heroism. However, Ralph and Simon have instances of committing heroic acts. Ralph is courageous, he leads a group of boys to explore the unknown island they are stranded on. He also goes to face the Beast, and when things become difficult, Ralph does not give up. Ralph is also honest, he admits Simon's death was murder, and he was partially involved. Ralph also has many faults; he is not a strong leader. Ralph is unable to ensure the huts are built or the signal fire is watched and tended. By the end of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph has murdered Simon and failed to save Piggy. Simon may be the closest character to a hero in the book. He shows physical courage; he is the only boy brave enough to climb the mountain and find the dead parachutist, he is kind to the littluns and helpful in building the huts. Simon understands what is happening on the island and dies trying to help the other boys understand and therefore escape their fear.

I have not had the opportunity to be fearless like Zack, brave like Ralph, or as conscious and discerning as Simon. However, if I had the chance to do something good for humanity, I would hope I'd have the know-how and bravery to do so.

In *Armada*, who was thought to be the villain, the Europeans, were not. The alien race ended up being humanity's allies. In contrast, *Lord of the Flies* has a clear villain who had no empathy for humanity-- Jack. The Europeans could also be considered the "Beast" in the book *Armada* because they were also feared and misunderstood as the "Beast" in *Lord of the Flies*. The Europeans were feared because they had the power to annihilate the entire human race if they wanted to. The Europeans struck fear in the government/humanity, much like the "Beast"

struck panic on the boys. Compare this to the "Beast" in *Lord of the Flies*, who also didn't necessarily need to be feared as something external but instead acknowledged as something internal that could have been conquered through self-will, understanding, and confidence. This is like how, as you get older, you learn to control your emotions, not throw things at people, hitting them, or biting them.

The themes of these books are very different. The theme of *Lord of the Flies* is the conflict between civilization and savagery, while the theme of *Armada* is family and love because every soldier is fighting for someone they care about; Zack is fighting for his mom, and the other soldiers were fighting for the people they loved at home. Both of these books brought two questions to my mind, what is goodness and what is reality? I believe that people's goodness or evilness depends on many different factors; their biology, psychology, if they have an entity/are possessed, how they were raised, and their social and economic environment/status. In *Armada*, the community seemed strong and united, while in *The Lord of the Flies*, the community was divided. In *Armada*, everyone was uniting to fight against the alien invaders, while in *Lord of the Flies*, most of the boys turned to savagery out of conflict and competition between the would-be leaders.

What both of these books have in common that messed with me was the fundamental question; What *is* our reality? In *Armada*, for most of the book, the main character thought he was playing a video game, only to find out that the government was secretly training him to fight off alien invaders. Then, the alien invaders turned out to (Spoiler alert!) be a giant metal computer. In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys didn't know what their reality was either; what was the Beast? Where were they? Where were their families? And as a reader, I found myself questioning the actual words I was reading. For instance, a conch was not just a conch- it was a symbol of authority, law, and order. Piggy's glasses weren't just for him to be able to see; they

symbolized knowledge and science. Lastly, the Beast wasn't just something the boys were afraid of; it was their inner savagery and fear of the unknown.

I chose to read *Armada* because I thought it would be fun. I wasn't looking to learn anything new necessarily, but I did. It encouraged me to ask questions about the very nature of video games. One very positive thing I learned, which was unexpected, was also in *The Atlantic*. It was that video games are now being used to treat soldiers PTSD. Games such as Virtual Afghanistan create "'immersive, interactive environments.' With the help of clinicians in controlled settings, soldiers are able to confront traumatic memories in a process called exposure therapy. By recalling distressing episodes from their past, soldiers learn to habituate themselves to those fearful experiences. Games help them manage their negative emotions and troubled thoughts. "This leads me to other questions I'd like to investigate; by playing these violent games, do we become desensitized to violence and then more inclined to engage in it? Are video games inherently good or bad for humanity?

As I've already stated, I thought this book was going to be an easy fun read, but it turned out to be a book in which I questioned things beyond the scope of video games; What is the government's responsibility in being honest with its citizens? And what is our actual reality? My art project attempts to depict this by showing the reality of photographs and the virtual reality of my drawings. I chose to paste my reality/virtual reality photographs on a box, representing the 5th and 6th dimensions. Every photo has two realities, one from this world and one from *Armada*. Similarly, as *Universe Today* says; "According to Superstring Theory, the fifth and sixth dimensions are where the notion of possible worlds arises. If we could see on through to the **fifth dimension**, we would see a world slightly different from our own that would give us a means of measuring the similarity and differences between our world and other possible ones.

In the **sixth**, we would see a plane of possible worlds, where we could compare and position all the possible universes that start with the same initial conditions as this one (i.e. the Big Bang). In theory, if you could master the fifth and sixth dimension, you could travel back in time or go to different futures.” These paragraphs tie into my project because they show how the 5th and 6th dimensions can hold different realities. Which is true?

Playing War: How the Military Uses Video Games.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/10/playing-war-how-the-military-uses-video-games/280486/>

<https://www.universetoday.com/48619/a-universe-of-10-dimensions/>

Universe Today