

# The Deadliest Game Short Guide

## The Deadliest Game by Tom Clancy

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## Overview

In *The Deadliest Game*, third of the Net Force books, an unknown master programmer has taken the events in an on-line computer game too seriously and is "bouncing"—as the outside removals of players are called—players by burglarizing their homes and trashing their computers. The bouncer even is willing to commit murder in real life in order to have his or her way in the virtual reality of Sarxos, a fantasy role-playing game. As in the other Net Force novels, teenagers, mostly members of Net Force Explorers, a group sponsored by the FBI's Net Force and led by the somewhat obtuse Captain James Winters, defy authority, use deductive reasoning, and through courage and intelligence track down evildoers. In *The Deadliest Game*, Net Force Explorers Megan and Leif race to find the bouncer before they themselves are bounced—permanently.

## About the Author

Thomas L. Clancy Jr. had published only a letter and a short article before he submitted his novel *The Hunt for Red October* to the Naval Institute Press, a publisher devoted to scholarly writings about sailing and the sea which had decided only recently to add fiction to its publications. An insurance salesman with a bachelor's degree in English, Clancy had never served in the navy. Even so, his book was accepted for publication, and it appeared in late 1984.

He later sold the paperback rights for \$49,500.

Since the publication of that blockbuster, Clancy has become an internationally famous writer and something of a cult personality, especially among technophiles.

Each of his subsequent novels has been a best-seller, often before publication because of advance orders, with sales numbering in the millions.

Although *The Hunt for Red October* was published with little initial fanfare, it caught the fancy of book reviewers and public figures such as President Ronald Reagan and members of his administration, diplomats (the embassy of the Soviet Union purchased several copies), and public officials, who were interested in Clancy's careful comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the Atlantic navies of the Warsaw Pact of the Communist East and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of the West.

Since that time, Clancy's books have continued to be read by public officials and military people seeking to understand the intricacies of technology and power.

Steve R. Pieczenik is a modern Renaissance man—a psychiatrist, a statesman, and an author. He received his B.A. in 1964 from Cornell University and his M.D. in 1968 from Cornell University Medical College.

He completed his residency in psychiatry in 1974 at Harvard Medical College. In 1982, MIT awarded him a Ph.D. in international relations.

In addition to having a private psychiatric practice, Pieczenik has served as deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs for Secretary of State James Baker, and under Secretaries of State George Shultz, Cyrus Vance, and Henry Kissinger in a wide variety of capacities, perhaps most significantly as a negotiator of peace treaties, negotiator for deployment of United Nations peacekeeping forces, and negotiator for efforts to provide medical and other humanitarian relief to nations in distress such as Cambodia. From the early 1970s onward he has been at the heart of decision making and management of America's resources and diplomatic relations, and often has been called to direct American foreign relief efforts. Of particular interest to readers of *Net Force* and its sequels would be his work to create America's antiterrorist policies under Cyrus Vance and Henry Kissinger. His work in the health field, especially

in setting up health agreements between the United States and other nations, has been immense.

Somehow, he has found time to write books. His *My Life Is Great. Why Do I Feel So Awful?* (1990) is about women's mental health issues, with advice for overcoming obstacles to self-esteem and happiness. He has written several novels about international intrigue, drawing on his firsthand experience, and it may be these works that attracted Tom Clancy. He and Clancy created the Op-Center series of international espionage novels, aimed at an adult audience, and the Net Force books, aimed at a young adult audience.

Diane Elizabeth Duane is a well-established writer of fiction for young adults.

She was born in New York City on May 18, 1952, to an aircraft engineer and his wife.

As a young adult, she loved reading, but when she went to college, she focused first on astronomy, another love, and then on nursing, becoming a registered nurse.

Although she broke into publishing with the novel *The Door into Fire* (1979) and other fantasies for adults, she probably gained her greatest fame as a contributor to the *Star Trek* novel series, boosting her to best-seller status. Her books in the "Wizardry" series are probably her best known for young adults, beginning with *So You Want to Be a Wizard* (1983) and two of its sequels, *Deep Wizardry* (1985) and *High Wizardry* (1990), achieving perennial popularity.

## Setting

The Deadliest Game offers a deeper, more immersive experience of virtual reality than do its predecessors. Although criminal acts in the real world motivate the investigation of activity in the Sarxos game, nearly all of the action in *The Deadliest Game* takes place in the virtual land of Sarxos. In Sarxos, a few million people play imaginary fantasy figures ranging from blacksmiths to wizards.

Sarxos creator Chris Rodrigues has created a well-balanced and flexible game environment in which players may in general adventure freely without much fear of having their characters lost or trashed, and the societies that the players have created on Sarxos's two continents are complex and able to evolve out of player actions.

A character named Shel at the beginning of the novel serves to introduce the setting and concepts underlying the game. Shel's strategy for battle and his handling of various characters in the aftermath of the battle show how the game works and how realistic and immersive it is. Shel's experiences reveal a fantasy world that is very detailed, with player characters and game-generated characters almost indistinguishable from one another. The opening events also reveal how much time a player may invest in the game; Shel has a whole history behind him and has risen over time to become a lord of a small but complex domain. He must fight off invaders, maintain a city, and help his people be prosperous. When he is bounced by a cheater, he loses years of game play, with other players moving in to replace him and take over his lands while he spends weeks convincing the game company that he is who he says he is before regaining his trashed game character identity.

According to Rodrigues, the game is so attractive, the characters so interesting, that "People have started saying that they want to stay here . . . live here." Therein lies the rub. When the bouncer takes the game too seriously, it concerns Net Force, the FBI's division devoted to computer crime, and the Net Force Explorers try to track the culprit through the complexities of a computer-generated world.



# Social Sensitivity

Each of the Net Force novels is a tale of the potential that virtual reality has to revolutionize life for the better, and of the dangers presented by those who wish to use the technology to harm and rule others. The Net Force Explorers are the vanguard of the forces of freedom, using their ingenuity to keep the Internet a place of liberty and safety.

The Deadliest Game extrapolates from a present-day phenomenon, the on-line computer game. On-line games take many forms, but they are all played via the Internet, usually from a personal computer and a modem. Games can take the forms of traditional card games and board games, simulations such as flying jet aircraft, war games in which battles old or modern or future are fought, fighting games in which players engage in combat either hand-to-hand or with modern weapons such as rifles and rockets, or role-playing games in which a player assumes the identity of a fictional character and has adventures in a fantasy or a science fiction world. In The Deadliest Game, the game Sarxos is a fantasy roleplaying game, somewhat like Ultima Online or Ever Quest, but with much more depth of characterization and far more freedom to interact with the game's environment.

The obsessive behavior of some figures in The Deadliest Game is manifested in online role-playing games: some people spend more time playing their on-line characters than they do in living their real lives. Ultima Online in particular has become so well established and real to players that real estate in its imaginary world is sold on-line for real-life money. A well-developed estate with castle and farmland can sell for thousands of dollars.

The problem of cheating in on-line games probably began the instant there were online games. In role-playing games, cheating usually takes one of two forms. One is that players with well-developed characters seek out new players and kill them, thus boosting their combat experience (which boosts the points that elevate their characters' skills) with little risk to themselves. Everquest prevents player characters from killing other player characters except in one or two special areas in which those players who want to kill each other may do so without disturbing the fantasy experience of players who are more interested in exploration of a fantastic environment. In The Deadliest Game, Rodrigues does something similar for players who want to use firearms in Sarxos: he designates a couple of areas in which firearms are enabled but makes them unable to work in the rest of Sarxos.

The second common form of cheating is to rewrite the code for a player's character so that the character can never lose. In games with much combat, this means even the best-developed characters can be felled by a poorly developed character whose code does not allow it to be hurt or overcome. Some cheaters redo their code so that they have all the weapons and all the magical powers available in the game without having to explore and interact with other characters in order to find them. This would seem to spoil the fun of the game, but it happens often enough to be a source of frequent



complaints in the chat areas (places outside of the playing area where players can "talk" to each other and to the people who run the game).

The Deadliest Game draws on these already common forms of cheating, implying that the step to criminal behavior is not far.

The cheater is already a dishonest person.



## Literary Qualities

The Deadliest Game begins with misdirection; it makes Shel seem like the main character, only to drop him. Because the game is the thing in The Deadliest Game, the opening immerses the reader in the game itself, showing the sort of world in which the novel's main characters will have to function. This is important because Sarxos is the most important setting in the novel; little of the action will make sense if the game's setting is confusing. Even so, some knowledge of computers and virtual reality in particular will help in understanding what The Deadliest Game is about.



## Themes and Characters

"There's nothing more fatal than believing a lie is the truth," declares the director of the Net Force Explorers, James Winters, and this is the major theme of *The Deadliest Game*. Throughout the novel, distinguishing between what is true and what is not is crucial to the solution of the crimes committed against game players and to the survival of the main characters, Meg O'Malley and Leif Anderson. Is Wayland a game-generated character or a representation of a real-world player? Is Rodrigues the creator of Sarxos or the bouncer? Telling who is real from who is not is a difficult task for Megan and Leif, but the bouncer seems to have a way of identifying whom he is playing against. Even so, the bouncer's criminal acts are motivated by a failure to distinguish truth from lie. The land of Sarxos has come to mean more to him or her than real life—the lie has become more important than the truth.

Both Megan and Leif play Sarxos. When players are bounced from the game, they become interested in finding out what is going on. In spite of direct orders from Winters, who tells them to leave the detective work to the FBI because the bouncer is very dangerous, they enter the game world to try to find the player character of the bouncer. Leif explains: The reason we're lucky enough to be Explorers in the first place is because they saw something in us that was not the usual kind of behavior. A little more willing to swing out into the unknown, maybe.

Megan and Leif probably know Sarxos better than anyone in Net Force, but they have trouble knowing whom to trust and what to tell Winters, and a few bad choices may kill them.

A possible suspect is Rodrigues, reverently referred to as "Rod" in the game, who is treated as a godlike being who lives in a mysterious hideout across an ocean. He is not an imposing figure in person (or as himself within the game): Suddenly a tallish guy was standing there, in jeans and a T-shirt and somewhat beatup-looking sneakers: a big-boned man, somewhere in his middle years, with curly unruly hair and a curly beard and brown eyes, the kindest eyes Megan thought she had ever seen.

Could the seemingly benign Rodrigues be the bouncer, removing players because they are somehow upsetting the careful balance in his game? Or is he an ally, giving Megan and Leif what they need in order to ferret out the real bouncer?

At first the bouncer invades homes and destroys computers, ruining players' games.

"Somebody spends a year, two years, five, building up a character, being someone, and then all of a sudden . . . gone," remarks Wayland, an in-game character well known to Leif. The loss is years of game play, as well as lost privacy and ruined equipment.

Building the narrative's suspense, the bouncer next attempts to murder a particularly troublesome player, and if Megan and Leif get too close to the truth, they will be the next targets for extermination. What Megan and Leif do not know is that the bouncer has

changed the rules and that all the safeguards and laws regarding implants (individual identifications unique to each person on the web) have been erased. All they see and think they know could be the lies of someone who will stop at nothing to have his or her own way.



# Topics for Discussion

1. Does *The Deadliest Game* make the future of exploring the web seem exciting? Would you want to be a part of it?

Does anything about it worry you?

2. What audience do the authors of *The Deadliest Game* seem to have in mind?

Do they do a good job of writing to please that audience? What could they do to make the novel more attractive to you?

3. Does the future society envisioned in *The Deadliest Game* look like a better one than we have now or a worse one?

4. Would you want to be a Net Force Explorer? Who would want to be?

5. Why do the people using computers in *The Deadliest Game* not have keyboards?

6. What are the "implants" in the novel?

Are they a good idea? What would be the potential for their abuse?

7. Does the revolution in computer sciences offer more new motives for people to commit crimes than the technology's benefits are worth?

8. Why would someone commit crimes such as burglary and attempted murder over a game? After all, is a game not just a game and not real life?

9. What is a "bounce" in *The Deadliest Game*?

10. Why do Megan and Leif disobey Winters and continue their investigation?

Should they have obeyed Winters?

Should they be punished for disobeying him?

11. Why does *The Deadliest Game* emphasize young adults taking the initiative?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What on-line games are available for playing? How are they played? Are they taken as seriously as Sarxos is in *The Deadliest Game*? Do some players actually wish they could live in the online games as some wish in *The Deadliest Game*?
2. How does the World Wide Web work?
3. What laws are there governing the use of the web? Who enforces the laws?
4. What is "virtual reality"? How does it work?
5. What advances in technology and software are necessary for the virtual world of *The Deadliest Game* to become reality?
6. If you were in charge of setting up the Net Force Explorers, what would you need in order to make it interesting as well as instructive for the Explorers?

Who would join the Net Force Explorers? Would anyone be excluded?

7. Are there any scientific studies of the people who play on-line games? Do they have any traits in common? What motivates them to play on-line games?
8. How would a person go about choosing an on-line game to join? What would he or she have to do to join a game?

How many people can play an on-line game at the same time?

9. How are on-line games designed? What challenges must designers overcome when creating on-line role-playing games?



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Steve Pieczenik. [www.stevepieczenik.com](http://www.stevepieczenik.com).

The author's web site has information on his publications and other achievements.



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Washingtonian 32, 4 (January 1997): 49-52. Victory discusses Clancy's popularity, attributing some of it to his careful presentation of facts about important issues.

Zinsser, John. "Clear and Present Sounds." Publishers Weekly 245, 28 (July 13, 1998): 51. Mentions the adapting of Clancy's fiction to audio recordings.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

The Net Force series begins with *Net Force*, which is almost a hybrid novel, most of it seeming to be aimed at adult audiences but with long sections seemingly designed to attract young adult readers. In the passages detailing how youngsters help to identify and then track down the terrorist responsible for ordering the murders of Net Force and Mafia leaders and for numerous computer virus attacks on important computer systems, *Net Force* lays the groundwork for its sequels, all aimed at young adult readers.

The first sequel, *Virtual Vandals*, establishes the settings and atmosphere for the novels to follow. The year is 2025, and the Internet has become an intricate world of interconnecting virtual realities. People have implants that allow them to blend their consciousnesses into the imaginative, fabricated locales created by individual people, as well as by governments and businesses.

The implants are supposed to give each person a unique, irreproducible identification when they enter the virtual reality of the Internet and wherever they wander in the various virtual settings. Although people are not supposed to be physically affected by events in their virtual worlds, leave it to a clever, sinister hacker to find a way around the limitation.

The *Deadliest Game* is followed by *One Is the Loneliest Number*, in which the virtual reality of the Internet, a technology on which most of the world is dependent, takes on a sinister new reality when sims, games that focus on creating accurate computer versions of real world technology such as jet aircraft and railroad engines (very similar to the "sims" that are popular as computer games today) or of historical events, cross the line between imaginative modeling and outright reality. A bitter young hacker makes an intellectual leap in reasoning and opens the way for invasion of the human body from the web.





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