One Is the Loneliest Number Short Guide

One Is the Loneliest Number by Tom Clancy

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

What happens when someone makes a scientific breakthrough that makes a breathtaking leap beyond current technology and then uses that breakthrough for petty and childish revenge? In One Is the Loneliest Number, the genius is a fool; he has much reason to be bitter, but his attitudes toward others are destined to create enemies. Although he has a genius for programming, he does not think matters through, putting the world at risk. Although in One Is the Loneliest Number this issue is a very personal one for Roddy and those he hurts, the novel also touches on the broader issue of scientific responsibility. It is not enough to discover something and unleash it on the world; what the discovery will do to the world should also be thought through.

In One Is the Loneliest Number, failure to think with discipline could unleash a terrorist weapon more horrible than any unleashed before.

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. Only recently had the editors of the press decided to add fiction about the sea 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 in late 1984 it appeared. He later sold the paperback rights to The Hunt for Red October for $49,500.

Since the publication of that first novel in 1984, Clancy has become an internationally famous writer and something of a cult personality, especially among technophiles.

The Deadliest Game, 1999 (Tom Clancy, Steve Pieczenik, and Diane Duane) One Is the Loneliest Number, 1999 (Tom Clancy, Steve Pieczenik, and Diane Duane)Each novel he has published since the blockbuster The Hunt for Red October has been a best-seller, 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. Some reviewers objected to the novel's improbable plot (Clancy says that it was inspired by a reallife incident, the attempt of the Soviet missile frigate Storozhevoy to defect in 1975), but most admired the detailed and accurate representation of ships and life at sea. Nearly all reviewers agreed that the novel was a rip-roaring adventure with well-sustained suspense. Alerted by the reviewers, the public made the book a best-seller.

Others besides reviewers were interested in the novel. President Ronald Reagan and members of his administration reportedly read and admired the book. In addition, diplomats ordered copies; even the Soviet embassy purchased several copies.

Public officials 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 (NATO) of the West. Since that time his books have continued to be read by public and military officials seeking to understand the intricacies of technology and power.

His books are consistent best-sellers, often before they are even published because of advance orders.

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, particularly for deployment of United Nations peacekeeping forces, and 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 decisionmaking and management of U.S. resources and diplomatic relations, and has often 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 as well. His My Life Is Great. Why Do I Feel So Awful? (1990), on women's mental health issues, gives advice for overcoming obstacles to achieving high 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 they are responsible for creating 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 (she would become a registered nurse), rather than on writing.

She broke into book publication with The Door into Fire (1979) and other fantasies for adults, but probably gained her greatest fame as a contributor to the Star Trek series of novels, which boosted her to best-seller status. Her Wizardry series comprises probably her best-known books for young adults, beginning with So You Want to Be a Wizard (1983). That book and its two sequels, Deep Wizardry (1985) and High Wizardry (1990), have achieved perennial popularity.

Setting

Most of the action takes place on the web, a virtual world created by computers.

Computer users no longer use keyboards to interface with computers; they simply switch on their computers and, with the aid of their implants, seem to merge into imaginary realities. They begin at their virtual desktops, areas in their web sites where they collect and send e-mail, and store the programs they use to move about the web.

All the images are symbolic of programs and data files.

The main characters of One Is the Loneliest Number are "sim" enthusiasts. A sim is a program created to simulate the structure and behavior of something else. For instance, Maj designs a sim of a real-life experimental aircraft from the early era of jet propulsion. Another character designs a sim of an old railroad engine. Sims tend to be very detailed and can represent almost anything found in the real world.

When the main characters try to figure out what Roddy has been doing, they find themselves in Roddy's elaborate and huge virtual world, and eventually in his crowded and strange virtual desktop. Booby traps make their efforts to escape dangerous and possibly deadly.

Social Sensitivity

One Is the Loneliest Number returns to an issue introduced in Net Force: the Internet's potential for terrorism. The nature of the terrorist group in One Is the Loneliest Number is not explained as thoroughly as the group in Net Force. Its role in the novel is to show what evil people would do with an important discovery if they could get their hands on it before legal authorities found out about it. In One Is the Loneliest Number, the discovery is a way to infect virtual simulations of people in such a way that their real-life bodies manifest the symptoms of the infection. For the terrorists, this is a magic bullet: they could send e-mail to anyone and have them manifest all the symptoms of any disease, including deadly ones. The murders would be untraceable, and most of the time the victims would be thought to have died from natural causes because infection through a computer is supposed to be impossible. It is a kind of germ warfare for the virtual age. Further, it illustrates why Net Force is needed.

The authors of One Is the Loneliest Number have taken care to properly motivate their characters, and they touch on social issues when they do. An important one is the neglect of poor children; Roddy has built up great resentment toward those who may pursue their educations freely. His life is a constant struggle to scrape together discards that he can use. He also lives in an abusive home environment: his father is absent, and his mother, bitter from a lifetime of working and yet remaining poor, forever runs him down. It is no wonder that Roddy has a very warped notion of doing people favors by teaching them "lessons" such as ruining Maj's aircraft simulation; his mother teaches him such lessons all the time. These factors do not excuse his cruelty—he is still responsible for his own behavior, no one else is—but they point to a complex social issue that has yet to be resolved: how to help neglected and abused youngsters before their lives spin out of control.

The character Alain recalls an issue brought up in Virtual Vandals, second in the Net Force series. In that novel, poor youngsters resent rich ones: "Rich kids are always ready to use you," as Leif Anderson puts it in that novel. Alain is a very spoiled child who has learned to get his way by having others do his work for him. He plans to use his skills at manipulation to earn entry into Net Force, where he believes he will be a master manipulator and a brilliant success.

Like Roddy, he is a fool, but unlike Roddy, he is lazy and has neglected his studies. In One Is the Loneliest Number, his laziness gives an edge to Roddy's revenge on him, but in a larger perspective he is representative of the unrealistic views of the future that many young adults have. No matter what their talents, they are not making it into Net Force or any other responsible job without a good education.

Literary Qualities

One Is the Loneliest Number is full of ironies. For instance, Roddy notes that "if you were careful and thoughtful, you could find a way to make a computer user's persona sick," yet what he is not is "careful and thoughtful." Instead, he is self-absorbed, an immature teenager who does not think beyond his own immediate feelings. Besides, he is not half as clever as he thinks he is—readers are likely to have figured out what he was up to long before it is revealed.

One Is the Loneliest Number ventures into some tricky philosophical territory, main taining that "the experience of the mind, finally, was virtual. It experienced nothing directly. Everything was filtered through the senses, even as virtual experience had to come to the mind via the computer interface's manipulation of those senses." In Roddy's view, there is a "mind-body interface"; that is, the mind is as separate from the body as it is from the computer. His insight is that the virtual reality of the web can mimic the human body.

This comes close to Aristotle's views on the mind. Aristotle argued that the mind is something apart from the physical world, and he viewed the ability to conceive of abstractions as evidence that the mind is not material, as the body is. He regarded the ability of the mind to think apart from the body as essential to higher thought and creativity; people like Roddy can invent something never seen before because they can first imagine it in their minds. Not everyone agrees with Aristotle (and Roddy).

For example, a significant tenet of modern atheism is that the mind is part of the body, that it is brain cells and blood vessels; in this view, the mind does not experience anything virtually, as Roddy sees it, but experiences it directly, making all experience material. In this view, imagination is an interconnecting of brain cells, hormones, and electrical currents. The premise of One Is the Loneliest Number rejects this materialistic view and others like it, opting for a more Aristotelian view that minds may have lives of their own apart from physical experience.

Themes and Characters

Revenge is a nasty business: Maj saw the sweat burst out on Alain's forehead with great suddenness, and as it did so, his virtual persona fell off, so that he wasn't disguised anymore, but was palpably Alain, palpably out of control, lurching around, his eyes glazing and the pupils looking dilated and fixed, his face suddenly fixed too, in a sort of long unsmiling rictus. He didn't seem to be able to move his head, and it stayed as still as if he was wearing a neck brace, though all the rest of him now seemed to be trying to go in all directions at once.

Alain Thurston had bid fair to be the villain of One Is the Loneliest Number, but his estimation of his own superiority to others is far out of proportion with reality. Roddy may be a fool, but he is intelligent enough to know that Alain has been trying to manipulate him.

Maj is Madeline Greene, a member of the Group of Seven (even though there are nine members), an association of high-schoolers interested in creating elaborate simulations in their "playrooms" (web pages). Maj devotes herself to very detailed reproductions of aircraft; others re-create Civil War battles, automobiles, or railroad engines, each in fastidious detail. They also judge one another's efforts. She and other members live far apart in the real world, coming together in one place only in their playrooms.

Maj is also a member of the Net Force Explorers, a group of young adults sponsored by the FBI's Net Force, a division devoted to combating computer crime. In spite of this, she does not live her life on the web the way some other youngsters do. She has a busy family life, coping with older brothers who eat everything that looks like food, and she plays the viola. Practicing her music seems to compete with her time on the web.

When Roddy L'Officier sabotages her sim, Maj does not realize how important her connection to Net Force is about to become. Roddy may or may not be a genius; his entry into the Group of Seven was engineered by Alain Thurston, who believed that Roddy "was one of those people around whom life would never be dull."

On the other hand, "Roddy looked dull enough: big but pudgy for seventeen, with a blobby, unfinished look to him, wearing an unprepossessing face in which nothing but his eyes seemed alive."

Alain himself at first seems the likely villain of One Is the Loneliest Number, because he has egged on Roddy, encouraging him to wreck Maj's simulation. Roddy, who has almost no social skills, truly seems to think that he was doing Maj a favor by showing her what could happen to her sim because of her lax security precautions. It does not occur to him that he could have just shown her the holes in her security and left her aircraft alone. On the other hand, Alain, a junior in high school, was coasting. He showed up at school every day, sat in the assigned seat in each assigned room, and did as much as he felt like of the assigned work, real or virtual—usually not very much. This was what Alain and a couple of his cronies referred to as the Minimum Assured

Destruction plan: meaning that, by cooperating this much but no more with the school Establishment, they would destroy no more than the minimum number of their brain cells.

He sees himself as a master manipulator of people, and thus as more intelligent than other people. Yet he is undisciplined, lazy, and ignorant. Roddy is a much more disciplined thinker than Alain—although both he and Alain are fools—and he can see that Alain has been trying to dupe him.

Thus, Alain turns out to be a "red herring" (a literary term meaning a misleading suspect in a mystery). Poor, inept, egotistical Roddy turns out to be the source of the threat to world security, not Alain, who ends up in a hospital and makes his final bid for fool of the year by telling a terrorist about Roddy's discovery of how to infect people in virtual reality.

But even at this point One Is the Loneliest Number defies expectations. Roddy's actions are certainly despicable, motivated by childish notions of revenge, but they stem from his immaturity and are not well thought out. He justifies infecting Maj as revenge for "what she made me do to her the other day"; he is blaming the victim for his actions. This certainly makes him seem worthy of contempt and of any evil that befalls him, but it turns out that he is echoing his mother. This does not mean he is not responsible for what he does, but it makes him pitiable, almost a sympathetic character. When he invites the world to his remarkable playroom, a marvelous place of caves and atriums and imaginary beings, he is surprised by the reaction. The sarcastic Roddy, ever ready to teach a cruel lesson, finds himself admired, a new event in his life of poverty and constant putdowns. He is invited to computer corporations and asked his opinions on projects, and he is listened to with respect. He is even offered jobs. Inept Roddy begins to develop some self-respect and to feel that he actually belongs in the world, that he can have a place where he is accepted as part of a group—in this case, computer programmers. He "had long been 'the loneliest number,' someone trapped in an isolation that had become a matter of habit." His yearning to be accepted as part of a group is common among teenagers, and it humanizes him, transforming him into a pitiable youngster rather than a diabolical criminal. Even Maj, twice Roddy's victim and sick almost to death from his cruelty, finds it in her to sympathize with him.

By the end of One Is the Loneliest Number Roddy seems redeemable, but he has run into someone far more evil than he. He may be a fool lashing out at innocent people, but Rachel Holloran is a calculating murderer.

Having established a false identity as a Net Force agent, she learns from Alain of Roddy's achievement and then ensnares Roddy in a trap. She convinces him to tell her all about his discovery by telling him that she can have him sent to prison. She plans to sell the discovery to terrorists and then disappear with the money she earns. Roddy will be killed so that only the terrorists will have his secret for passing infections through the web.

It is good that Maj has a connection to Net Force. Taking on Roddy is dangerous, but taking on international terrorists could be truly deadly. Mark Gridley, son of the Net Force director, a character introduced in Net Force as an assistant to then-director Michaels, turns out to be a valuable companion, although he, like Maj, falls prey to a booby trap that infects him. He draws in Charlie Davis, who is studying medicine.

Combining Maj's knowledge of Roddy and of simulations with Charlie's knowledge of medicine, as well as with Mark's knowledge of technology, makes the trio a powerful team—one that can figure out what Roddy has been doing.

As in previous Net Force novels, the youngsters take the initiative even though James Winters, director of the Explorers, warns them to back off, telling them that the situation is too dangerous. The youngsters, however, make the morally correct decision to tackle Roddy themselves—no one else has the necessary access to Roddy's world. Without their work, terrorists could have a frightful new weapon. Maj and Mark become very ill, but they know the risks they are taking in order to protect others and face their illnesses with as much grace as is possible while throwing up. An unexpected ally is Roddy himself, who "liked civilization" and cooperates with the real Net Force to trap Holloran.

Topics for Discussion

1. Does One Is the Loneliest Number make the future of creating simulations on the web seem exciting? Would you want to be a part of it? What would you create?

2. What audience do the authors of One Is the Loneliest Number 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 One Is the Loneliest Number look better than the one we have now, or worse?

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

5. Why do the people using computers in One Is the Loneliest Number not have keyboards?

6. What are the "implants" in the novel? Are they a good idea? What is the potential for their abuse?

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

8. Is Roddy correct that "the experience of the mind, finally, was virtual"?

9. Who are the villains in One Is the Loneliest Number? What makes them villainous?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does the World Wide Web work?

2. What is "virtual reality"? How does it work?

3. What are computer simulations? What are they used for? How would someone design a simulation like Maj's?

4. What advances in technology and software are necessary for the virtual world of One Is the Loneliest Number to become reality?

5. 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?

6. What is the science behind Roddy's method for making webwalkers sick? Can the body be stimulated into manufacturing toxins even when there is no infection?

7. Winters says, "The scientific method is a fad. A useful one . . . but hardly the only way to get things done." What are the other ways Winters suggests? Are there others? How do they vary from the scientific method? Why would the head of Net Force Explorers, a scientifically oriented group, believe that the scientific method is a fad? Have there been other fads in the way people think?

8. What examples are there of real-life terrorism using computers? How were computers used?

9. What are computer viruses? What do they do? Is Roddy's discovery a logical development in computer viruses? What motivates people to harm others with computer viruses?

10. One Is the Loneliest Number seems to have unusually deep characterizations for a thriller. How good are the characterizations? How well do the characterizations help to develop the novel's themes?

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www.stevepieczenik.com is Steve Pieczenik's web site. It has information on his publications and other achievements.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

The Net Force series begins with Net Force, which is almost a hybrid novel: most of it seems to be aimed at adult audiences, but long sections seem 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 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 identity 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 that limitation.

The Deadliest Game offers a deeper, more immersive experience of the virtual reality of 2025 than do its predecessors. Much of the action takes place in a grand, richly detailed online computer game called "Sarxos," a fantasy world of wizards and lords and a multitude of quasi-medieval figures, some played by real people and some invented by the game and its designer. The events are not far removed from present-day reality; there are already online games that some people play for more hours than they work and sleep. In The Deadliest Game, someone finds a way to evade the identification implant and adds some actual violence to an obsession with a game that some players find more real than the real world.

In One Is the Loneliest Number, the theme of the impact of the virtual reality of the Internet on the real world takes on a sinister new reality when sims cross the line between imaginative modeling and outright reality.

In these 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, with courage and intelligence, track down evildoers. Each novel 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, the vanguard of the forces of freedom, use their ingenuity to keep the Internet a place of liberty and safety.

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