

Net Force Short Guide

Net Force by Tom Clancy

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Overview

The premise of Net Force is that the World Wide Web will increase in importance in the near future, to the point that it is vital to maintaining modern life, and that it will increase in complexity while becoming easier to use. When people turn on their computers, they will instantly enter a virtual reality construct of their choosing—a place in which computer programs and files are represented by symbolic images.

The opportunities for better lives that the virtual world of the web provides is matched by the opportunities for abuse it provides. Thus, the FBI has set up a division called "Net Force," which has a mandate for tracking down crimes committed with computers. Net Force opens with an explosive scene in which the director of Net Force is murdered, and soon thereafter computer-caused disasters strike, seemingly at random, around the world. New Net Force director Alexander Michaels and his colleagues, with the timely aid of some young adult "webwalkers," must sort through dozens of false leads, dodge death at nearly every turn, and bring a megalomaniac with dreams of world domination to justice.

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 *One Is the Loneliest Number*, 1999 (Tom Clancy, Steve Pieczenik, and Diane Duane) 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.

Net Force 241 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.

Steve Perry was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on August 31, 1947. He brings to his writing a background of diverse achievements: he is a licensed practical nurse and a certified physician's assistant and has been a private detective, a lifeguard, a kung fu instructor, and a salesman. From the late 1970s to the present, he has been a professional writer, writing short fiction at first, then science fiction and fantasy novels beginning at the start of the 1980s. He has written for both grown-ups and young adults, and may be best known to young readers for his Conan pastiches such as *Conan the Fearless* (1986) and *Conan the Defiant* (1987) for Tor Books. His fiction is notable for faced-paced narratives and furious action scenes.

Setting

The most important settings in Net Force are found on the World Wide Web: Cyberspace wasn't really like the old movies that had first depicted it.... But virtual reality constructs—VRCs—did use imagery to help a webwalker navigate the web.

The images could be almost anything a user wanted. There were hundreds of standard commercial overlays, from cities with freeways, to old Western towns, to space flights.

How the VRCs interconnect can be complex. For instance, when two people meet on the web, one could be using images of freeways to represent the programs and files he is using, as well as to represent his movements from one web site to another, while the other user could be using images of space flight for the same purposes. There apparently can be a brief lag time as the VRCs translate actions into images suited to each user's construct. Most of the time in Net Force the construct is that of freeways, with both Net Force investigators and youngsters such as Tyrone Howard driving automobiles (representations of programs for moving among web sites) in pursuit of the master criminal whose key mistake is to use the same automobile to represent his movements as he commits his crimes rather than devising new images that might let him sneak past the Net Force unrecognized.



Social Sensitivity

Net Force focuses on the potential for abuse of a technology that interconnects people from all over the world. In a few moments, someone in a VRC can zip to several different nations without ever leaving his or her home. In Net Force, a terrorist takes advantage of this situation to wreak havoc in many distant areas of the world while moving about anonymously among the millions of other users of the web. That computer terrorism is possible is already well established in the present era. Computer viruses alone can shut down defense computers and destroy home computers.

Already, Internet service companies such as America Online and Compu Serve have been shut down by viruses that overwhelm their e-mail services with bogus messages; a medium-sized computer manufacturer was driven out of business when a virus was actually shipped on its hard disks (consumers stopped buying their computers); and hackers from Germany broke into America's defense computers and sold what they found to espionage agents.

Clancy and Pieczenik suggest that a logical response to the potential for computer terrorism is to establish a law enforcement agency that focuses on computer crimes.

They place the agency within the FBI. That many lives can be lost to computer terrorism is presented in chilling fashion in Net Force. The novel makes a strong case that people with exceptional computer skills will be needed to protect people from computer criminals in the near future. That the effort will be international in nature reflects the reality that the world is already interconnected on the web and is likely to become more so. That (in Net Force) the leaders in the effort to bring computer criminals to justice will be Americans may reflect an American bias on the part of American authors, but it has logic behind it: the FBI already sends its experts overseas to help solve international crimes, and America is at present the world leader in the hardware technology of computer development.

Literary Qualities

The structure of *Net Force* is vintage Clancy, with events demarcated by dates, times, and locales so that the narrative can give accounts of events happening simultaneously. He has used this structure in his novels beginning with *The Hunt for Red October*, and its appearance in *Net Force* suggests that he outlined the plot.

Although it is difficult to assign specific passages to specific writers in a book with corporate authors (meaning written by several authors), *Net Force* has a divided personality. Most of it is an adult thriller, comparable to Clancy and Pieczenik's *Op-Center* series (also with corporate authors), but some of it features young adults of about thirteen years of age tracking down the mastermind of the terrorism unleashed on the web. Perhaps these passages were included because Clancy and Pieczenik already planned to follow *Net Force* with a series of young adult novels, or perhaps the subject of adventuring in virtual reality is likely to appeal to a larger percentage of young readers—presumably comfortable with computer technology and the intricacies of virtual reality—than adult readers.

The prose style of the novel varies from sparkling prose to very old and annoying clichés (for instance, "Until he was caught, nobody was safe" and other allusions to a mad man being on the loose). *Net Force* has a scattering of one-liners typical of young adult novels, as in "the Island of Self-Pity was a waste of time" and "Rule 6P." Grownups may applaud these brief lessons, but young readers are likely to recognize them from other novels and not pay them much attention. In spite of some clumsy writing, the plot holds together well, and the action is fast and exciting.



Themes and Characters

In the Net Force novels, teenagers, mostly members of Net Force Explorers, defy authority, use deductive reasoning, and through courage and intelligence track down evildoers. Each novel is a tale of the potential 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.

There is not much depth to the characterizations in Net Force. The megalomaniac mastermind of crime, Vladimir Plekhanov, is given just enough motivation to make his actions seem plausible. Basically, he is a programming genius who uses his skills to create chaos on the web as part of his plan to become the most powerful person in the world. His terrorist underling Mikhayl Ruzhyo (a pseudonym meaning Mikhayl the Rifle) is fleshed out more than his boss, necessary for explaining why he wanders around killing people at risk of his own life merely because Plekhanov tells him to. In his case, Ruzhyo shares with his boss bitterness over the loss of a loved one, and he feels almost stateless, without a sense of allegiance to anything other than his boss, because his homeland was devastated in a war to break free from Russia.

Ruzhyo is not the most menacing killer in Net Force, which is remarkable considering his cold-hearted attitudes toward his victims and his professionalism that stems from his training in the Soviet Union's secret police. Instead, the mysterious Selkie is the most unpredictable and innovative of killers. She is a legend—many regard her as a myth—in law enforcement circles. She is said to be a shape shifter, able to transform herself into anyone. Even her gender is unknown, with most people, including those who hire her, assuming that she is a man.

Her only loyalty is to herself; she intends to continue killing for hire until she has amassed enough money to live off the interest, and then she will retire and disappear.

Hired by a Mafia leader who is under the mistaken impression that Net Force is killing his followers, she stalks Alexander Michaels through most of the novel. As a literary figure, she is a complication—that is, her presence is intended to make the resolution of the plot more difficult by adding obstacles and distractions for Michaels.

Michaels himself is not fleshed out. His principal humanizing trait is his love for the wife who left him and his inability to begin a new romance. Although he is the object of two assassination plots and he calls the shots for the FBI investigation, he is, even though the protagonist, remote from most of the action, which is carried out by those who work for him. His assistant, Toni Fiorella, is more fleshed out because she is given the opportunity to interact with more characters and in more locales than Michaels. Her secret love for Michaels seems a bit of a cliché, but it is enriched by her association with a new FBI agent and by her determination to have her professionalism govern her passions. Besides, she is a highly skilled fighter, whereas Michaels is primarily a desk jockey.



The youngsters in Net Force are of particular interest, in part because Net Force is the first novel in a series of novels intended for young readers. Tyrone Howard's father is the commander of an elite military unit that fights terrorists; Colonel Howard even leads an attack on terrorists during the course of the novel, although it turns out that the terrorist threat on an American embassy is part of Plekhanov's plans to keep American antiterrorist organizations so busy that they do not have time to deal with him. Tyrone is a skilled walker of the web; the tone of the novel implies that most American youngsters will be adept at traveling in the virtual worlds that will be found on-line. He and his friend James Joseph Hatfield help Jay Gridley, Net Force's master computer expert, track the comings and goings of Plekhanov on the web. Alert and eager to be of assistance, they take advantage of Plekhanov's mistake of using the same program (and the same automobile image) to travel the web while trashing important programs in several different nations. Plekhanov has chosen to do all the computer work himself, and he overextends himself—he just does not have time to use another program (image). He is defeated by teamwork—Tyrone, James, and Gridley combine their talents and their ideas to identify him and locate him so that Colonel Howard can deal with him. Tyrone and James are independent minded, and they take action without necessarily asking permission, an important element that is repeated in the other Net Force novels. Further, Gridley recognizes their skills, and while wanting them to stay out of harm's way, he treats them like the capable people they are—important for their participation in the action and presaging the advent of the Net Force Explorers, who will appear in the next novel in the series, Virtual Vandals.

The themes of terrorism and computer technology are obvious ones in Net Force.

Given that Pieczenik is an expert in the laws intended to combat terrorism and in how America protects itself from terrorists, and given that Clancy has written about terrorism several times, it is not surprising that Net Force's depiction of terrorism in the real world uniting with terrorism on the web should be detailed and logical. Further, Clancy's interest in technology has manifested itself in all of his books—not only his novels but his several books on military hardware—so it should not be surprising that the cutting-edge technology of the moment, computer technology, should dominate the plot. Even so, both these themes would be shallow without another theme of particular interest to young people—teamwork. It is tough to learn how much independence one must retain in order to 244 Net Force be a responsible adult and just how much independence one must surrender in order to behave ethically. Net Force abounds with examples of how personal responsibility combined with teamwork can result in positive actions that help people in need.

Obvious incidents are the forays by Colonel Howard's team. In the first incident, they overcome a badly organized team of terrorists with careful planning and each soldier's commitment to fulfill his part of the team's mission. Later, they capture Plekhanov through careful teamwork.

The teamwork of Colonel Howard's group relies heavily on a plainly laid system of command, with ultimate responsibility for decisions resting on Colonel Howard, but Net Force has other examples of teamwork. Tyrone and James form a team when they



cooperate on the web. In their case, no one orders them to do anything, but they choose to take action, and they succeed in part because they work together. Further, Gridley recognizes the value of their work, and by cooperating with the volunteers, he is able to get his job done. Alone against Plekhanov on the web, Gridley is almost able to find out what Plekhanov is up to, but the master computer terrorist seems just barely out of reach.

With the help of two youngsters for whom walking the web is like being a fish swimming in water, Gridley is able to overcome his adversary. Throughout the novel, good people who band together and follow Rule 6P ("proper planning prevents piss-poor performance") tend to outmaneuver brutal, clever enemies who lack either personal responsibility for their own actions or who fail to work together.



Topics for Discussion

1. How important are the young adults to the plot of Net Force?
2. Are the methods used to track Plekhanov plausible?
3. Why does the novel end with the Selkie and Ruzhyo still on the loose?
4. Why does Ruzhyo decide not to shoot Michaels or Plekhanov at the end? Do his reasons make sense? Are they consistent with his characterization?
5. Is the Selkie's failure to assassinate Michaels plausible?
6. Does the future society envisioned in Net Force look like a better one than we have now or a worse one?
7. How does teamwork function in Net Force? Does good teamwork always triumph over poor teamwork?
8. What are examples of teamwork in Net Force? What do the teams of terrorists and teams of gangsters have in common with the FBI's teams? What distinguishes them from the FBI's teams?
9. Does the revolution in computer sciences offer more opportunities for people to commit crimes than the technology's benefits are worth?
10. If you were in charge of setting up Net Force, what would you need in order to make Net Force effective? How would you plan to get your job done within the law?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the history of computer crime?

What forms does computer crime take?

What safeguards are there against computer crime?

246 Net Force 2. How does the World Wide Web work?

3. What laws govern the use of the web? Who enforces the laws?

4. What is virtual reality? How does it work?

5. What happened to the spetsnaz after the breakup of the Soviet Union? Did any become terrorists like Ruzhyo?

6. What was the war in Chechnya? Why was it fought? How did it end?

7. Does the FBI already investigate computer crimes? If so, what sort of computer crimes does it investigate? What are its procedures?

8. How important are computers to maintaining daily life? Could their sabotage cause the sort of disruptions depicted in Net Force?

9. What is a sociopath? Are there any characters in Net Force who are sociopaths? Are their characterizations consistent with psychological profiles of sociopaths?

10. What advances in technology and software are necessary for the VRCs of Net Force to become reality?

11. How are themes begun in Net Force worked out in its sequels?



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Publishers Weekly 245, 28 (July 13, 1998): 43. In a brief interview by Jeff Zaleski, Clancy says, as he has said before, that he has not used classified information in any of his books.

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Dampier, Cindy. "Patriot Games." People Weekly 47,1 (January 13, 1997): 37. About Clancy's computer game company.

Green, Roland. Booklist, January 1, 1999, 791. Says Green of *Net Force*, "This is a highly successful start-at-a-dead-run thriller with a hard-edged tone, vividly depicted hardware, and touches of humor and romance."

Kennedy, Dana. "Clear and Present Anger." Entertainment Weekly, October 10, 1997, 58-59. An account of Kennedy's effort to interview Clancy about his views of the future for the Internet and the World Wide Web. "He's not that interested in the Net," says Kennedy.

Maryles, Daisy. "The Cardinal of the Lists."

Publishers Weekly 245, 28 (July 13, 1998): 52. Notes the fabulous success of Clancy's fiction, mentioning that he has first hardcover printings in the millions of copies.

Review of *Net Force*. Publishers Weekly 246, 3 (January 18, 1999): 1. A review that says *Net Force* is mediocre, at best.

Quinn, Judy. "Clancy's deals top \$100 million." Publishers Weekly 244, 35 (August 25, 1997): 12. About Clancy's latest contracts for books.

Steve Pieczenik. www.stevepieczenik.com.

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

"Tom Clancy Last Year." Entertainment Weekly, October 30, 1998, 24. A brief account of Tom Clancy's wealth, book deals, and divorce from his wife.

Victory, Dick. "Clancy's Game." 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

Net Force is almost a hybrid novel, with 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* 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 on-line 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 presentday reality; there are already on-line 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 real world violence to an obsession with a game that some players find more real than the real world.

In *One Is the Loneliest Number*, 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), 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 Internet.

Net Force itself was presented as a television miniseries at the start of 1999. The plot was changed to allow for time for character exposition and violent, explosive scenes were added. The role of the young people, who cruise the virtual realities of the Internet with skill in the novel, are played down in the miniseries. The miniseries is somewhat slow-paced for an action thriller, but can be diverting. The novel has more depth and is more exciting.



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