Virtual Vandals Short Guide

Virtual Vandals by Tom Clancy

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Overview

It is 2025, fifteen years after the events in Net Force, the first in the Net Force series. A branch of the FBI dedicated to investigating computer crime, Net Force has established a "young people's auxiliary, the Net Force Explorers." These are high schoolers who participate in training programs designed by Net Force. In addition to honing their computer skills, they receive training in self-defense. In Virtual Vandals, members of the Net Force Explorers must use all that they have learned plus think quickly in order not only to thwart vandals who are trashing web sites and injuring people in virtual reality, but to stop a potential massacre of diplomats and their families. In Virtual Vandals, the virtual reality of the web comes of age, and a new, deadly threat emerges from it.

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.

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.

Bill McCay is the author of science fiction for young adults, most notably novelizations of the Stargate television series such as "Stargate: Reconnaissance" (1999). His novels for that series have been adapted to audio and are read by John Kenneth.

Setting

Virtual Vandals establishes the settings and atmosphere for the Net Force 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.

There are three important settings in Virtual Vandals. The first is presented at the beginning, Camden Yards stadium, where a baseball game is to be played. In attendance are people like Net Force Explorer Leif Anderson, who is actually in New York but is present as a hologram. Computer technology is so sophisticated that people can use their computers to be someplace far away as if they were actually there. Before the real ball game is to be played, a simulation is to be run to show off the ballpark's new holographic imaging system, and great baseball players of the twentieth century are to be presented as the players. (By the way, the novel has Ruth and Gehrig batting in the wrong order; longtime teammates, Ruth always batted third and Gehrig always batted fourth, not the reverse as in Virtual Vandals. Any baseball fan will understand why this had to be pointed out.) It is at the ballpark that a new era in criminal behavior manifests itself, as four people in holographic disguises spray the ballpark with virtual bullets-—symbols for a dangerous program that does not harm real people but seriously injures Leif and other people who are present as holograms. It is now possible to be "shot" and hurt—perhaps even killed—while on the web.

The next important setting is the web itself. It is a vast virtual construct of buildings and landscapes where people can visit virtual constructs of governments, businesses, and private people. For instance, Sean McArdle, son of an Irish diplomat, holds small press conferences in a virtual room that looks like an old European den, replete with big bookcases (symbols for information retrieval programs). The web is a wonderful place where the imagination seems to have few limitations—its potential for fun and joy is very appealing. Even so, the imagination can be a dark one, and where one person makes something joyous, another can make something destructive. In this evolving, perhaps forever-growing place, Matt and his fellow Net Force Explorers track down a menace that could ruin the web and create new opportunities for terrorism and other crimes. This is a world likely to be far more recognizable to young adults than to grown-ups.

The third significant setting is in a belt of decayed buildings, called a "ringtown," in Washington, D.C. Most of the houses seem abandoned and were plainly in great disrepair when people finally left them. There are remnants of warehouses and manufacturing plants, populated only by the street gang Buzzards. The training Net Force offers its Explorers proves invaluable, as Matt and his companions must think as quickly on their feet in the real world as they do in the virtual one. The escape passage

taken by itself would seem fairly routine—climb out a window, distract a guard, run away from gang members, get trapped, and so on—but its contrast with the false elegance of the web, in which ugly objects and ugly deeds can be represented by beautiful symbols, is striking. The point is plain: what happens on the web can have real-world consequences, and it is still in the real world of family and community that lives must be lived.

Social Sensitivity

The motivations for the characters in Virtual Vandals actually stem from our present era: exploitation of the poor by the rich ("Rich kids are always ready to use you," asserts Leif), diplomatic immunity protecting people who commit crimes such as murder ("Nothing like a little diplomatic immunity to make a person completely irresponsible," says Leif), young adults with too much free time on their hands, vandalism of all kinds, and the excuse that being unhappy justifies hurting others. Although Virtual Vandals is primarily a thriller and not a social treatise, it handles its social issues with some complexity—heroes and villains are not easily distinguished, and no particular social group is all good or all bad.

For instance, the teenagers who vandalize the virtual baseball exhibition are spoiled, selfish, and angry—but they cannot be labeled as entirely evil. For example, Caitlin is part of the group more because she is a weak personality than a malicious one, and the malevolent Gerald is motivated in his hatred by tragedy in his family. Yes, they are immature and cruel, but they also are given realistic motivations for their behavior.

The presentation of the street gang Buzzards may not ring entirely true, but it is an effort on the part of the authors to extrapolate current trends in present-day America into the future. They foresee rings of poverty around American cities—the inner cities have been revitalized and repopulated with well-to-do people, and the outer areas of the cities have become guarded communities for the rich and well connected, leaving a region of decay and despair between them.

Into this region today's street gangs move, and they offer a haven for young adults who are poor or without families. Rob Falk, who is poor and without much of family life, finds a home in a gang. That the leader of the gang is a visionary who imagines committing an extraordinary crime and that he recognizes in the "geek" Falk someone whose talent he can use may stretch credibility a bit for the sake of a sensational plot, but culture that nurtures the Buzzards is made ominously plausible through presentation of historical details.

Virtual Vandals may be its authors' response to cyberpunk, a popular subgenre of science fiction in which people live their lives in virtual reality. In general, these people have little or no life outside of computer-generated realities, with their bodies portrayed as flaccid, almost bloblike flesh kept alive through artificial feeding and other physical support technology. The grim images tend to accompany grim stories of violence and depravity. In Virtual Vandals, the virtual world is very attractive, but none of the characters ever forgets that there is an important real life of school, work, family, and friends of which computers are only a part—not the center of importance. The virtual reality of Virtual Vandals is a bright and beautiful place, but it is a place that is visited more than lived in.

It may be worth noting, here, that Virtual Vandals features a quality found in most of Tom Clancy's novels for adults: a diversity of ethnic groups. Americans of all backgrounds

are busy people in his novels of international conflict, and in Virtual Vandals, one may note that the young Explorers have a wide variety and mixture of ethnic ancestry, although they are united in their passion for computers and their heroic devotion to defending people from criminals.

Literary Qualities

The many cliches in Virtual Vandals could drive a reader nuts, with "Certain death!"

and the like around every corner. On the other hand the descriptions of the virtual experience are sometimes beautiful: Now Matt seemed to be flying through a vast city of light. Soaring skyscrapers in single blazing colors marked major corporate Web-nodes. Other virtual buildings were gray, with each window shining a different color—small business and individual e-mail sites. Yet other constructs floated in the coal-black sky.

This is good writing and is typical of most of the descriptions in Virtual Vandals.

The novel presents a future frontier besides that of outer space and the oceans—a frontier of the mind, created by thought and explored as if it were real.

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 that virtual reality has to revolutionize life for the better, and of the dangers presented by those who wish to use the tech nology 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 main character of Virtual Vandals is Matt Hunter. He and his friends—Andy Moore, David Gray, and Leif Anderson— attend a baseball game in order to watch a pregame show featuring holograms of great players of the twentieth century. Theirs is more than casual curiosity; they are skilled computer users who are interested in the technology behind the show: "In a world where operating a computer was more like flipping a light switch, Matt and his friends knew how the magic boxes worked." When the pregame show is vandalized, with many people, including Leif, being injured, Matt takes the initiative and tracks down the vandals.

Virtual Vandals introduces Captain James Winters to the Net Force series. He has created and organized the Net Force Explorers, a group of young adults who not only are interested in the technology of computers but are interested in law enforcement. His role in Virtual Vandals and subsequent novels is to be the authority figure the young heroes of the novels defy.

He is somewhat stern, prone to telling youngsters to back off of dangerous cases and to let adult FBI agents do the work; he is also protective of his charges and tends to reward good thinking and courage, even when his orders have been ignored. He is somewhat slower to understand what events mean than the young adults, probably because he cannot spend nearly as much time exploring the web as his Explorers can —he has a time-consuming job that requires his presence in the real world most of the time.

Still, when he is needed, day or night (there is no use in trying to keep a home phone number secret from youngsters who can find it on the web in a second), he provides the help his Explorers need.

Virtual Vandals emphasizes personal initiative and personal responsibility as its plot progresses. Matt has a personal interest in solving the case of the virtual vandals; he was present when they trashed the simulated baseball game, and he had friends who were hurt. Thus, he takes it upon himself to identify the vandals, and in so doing places himself in a complex moral dilemma.

The vandals themselves are three teenagers who have surrendered their personal responsibility to someone else. Even Caitlin Corrigan, the most sympathetic of the vandals, is a weak personality with all sorts of excuses for why she fell in with some spoiled brats and joined in trashing people's web sites. Gerald Savage, full of bitterness,

is particularly eager to hurt other people, and he is easily duped by the mastermind of their crimes, a gangster who uses the vandals to distract legal authorities from his less visible crimes on the web. Having surrendered their personal moral authority to another, the vandals are easily duped; when they commit an act of vandalism their master has forbidden, their treatment is markedly different from what happens to Matt.

When Matt defies Winters's orders, Winters is able to recognize the moral authority behind Matt's behavior—-Matt takes responsibility for his own actions. But Rob Falk, one-time geek and now a gangster, recognizes no such authority in his charges, for whom he has nothing but contempt. They are rich, spoiled kids with too much time on their hands, and he uses them the way he believes they use others less fortunate than themselves. Gerry is just a big, murderous bully, whose bitterness at his father's murder expresses itself in violence. On the other hand, Rob is a disciplined thinker, a scientist in the making, who focuses his bitterness at his mother's murder in elaborate planning for a truly horrific revenge. When his vandals overstep his rules, Rob has Gerry murdered; when they have served their purpose, he has them imprisoned to await execution.

This contrasts markedly with Winters and the Explorers. Being someone who takes responsibility for what he does, Matt has taken the time to learn the background of the Explorers, and he knows what the group's goals are; the vandals have no idea what their boss is up to and do not much care so long as they are allowed to harm people. There is a bond of mutual respect between Matt and Winters not matched by the vandals and Rob. When Matt oversteps the boundaries that Winters has set for him, Winters responds by helping Matt to learn more responsibility and to develop further his investigative talents.

Ultimately, Virtual Vandals is a morality drama in which irresponsible behavior leads to bad ends and moral behavior leads to good ends. When Matt joins the vandals in their trip to Sean McArdle's web site, he finds himself in a moral bind. Having pretended to be interested in joining the vandals, he has opened the way into McArdle's web site for the others as proof of his sincerity. When he joins them there, their violence and cruelty are appalling. With the power to actually hurt people in the real world through virtual reality (a power Matt lacks), Gerry almost kills McArdle. Matt the investigator may not wish to reveal himself to the vandals, but Matt the moral human being must act, and Matt makes the moral choice, saving Sean. When the vandals are unable to save themselves from Rob, it is again Matt who makes a moral choice, and he helps to save them. They may not deserve respect, but they are human beings about to be murdered, so when he engineers an escape, Matt makes sure that they all get out; he could easily have abandoned them. In the novel's anticlimax, Matt's moral behavior is rewarded, even while his disobedience of Winters is punished. (The punishment is to "bust my butt in advanced training," which Matt welcomes as a challenge; "The best possible punishment for success," Winters calls it.)

Topics for Discussion

1. Is Rob Falk justified in his hatred of diplomats and their families? Is he justified in wanting to take revenge on them?

2. Is Gerald Savage's behavior well motivated? Is his hatred of the Irish justified? Could anything be done to save him from himself?

3. How much responsibility does Matt bear for the trashing of Sean McArdle's virtual site? Is his participation justified?

4. Is the environment of the Buzzards believable? What would make it more credible?

5. Does Virtual Vandals make the future of exploring the web seem exciting? Would you want to be a part of it? Does anything about it worry you?

6. What audience do the authors of Virtual Vandals 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?

7. Does the future society envisioned in Virtual Vandals look like a better one than we have now or a worse one?

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

9. Does Caitlin get off too easily? Why would Matt trust her for anything?

10. Was Falk's plan for the invasion of the Gardens at Carrollsburg likely to succeed? What were its flaws? What were its strengths?

11. Why do the people using computers in Virtual Vandals not have keyboards?

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

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

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the science behind the notion that "belief" can affect injuries (as in Winters's comment that "Belief plays a large factor in virtual injuries")?

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

6. What advances in technology and software are necessary for the virtual world of Virtual Vandals to become reality?

7. 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?

8. Who are the baseball players named in the simulated baseball game at Camden Yards? Why would they be selected for a game of great players?

9. What are the divisions between the Irish and the British that would result in the violence described in Virtual Vandals? Would these divisions still exist in 2025?

10. What are enclosed communities like the Gardens at Carrollsburg? What are the social forces behind the creation of such communities?

11. How much of a social problem is vandalism today? Would vandals attack virtual reality the way they presently attack property?

For Further Reference

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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.

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Related Titles

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.

Following Virtual Vandals, 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 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.

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