



Cheat Codes

Like many guys his age, my twenty-year-old son is a master of video games. He especially loves the kind known as First-Person-Shooters, where the object of the game is to stalk animated enemies — aliens, monsters, or even people — through imaginary landscapes, and do battle using everything from shotguns to science-fiction plasma rifles.

Although my own video game skills are more attuned to *Pac-Man*, I sometimes grab one of the *X-Box* controllers and join my kids in a bit of video mayhem. We've battled zombies, robots, and ninjas together, in underground tombs, deserted buildings, and futuristic cityscapes.

I'm not much at video games, and I invariably get my butt kicked. My son, by contrast, knows every little trick in his favorite games. He breezes through these computerized combat scenarios with ease, while I get bitten, shot, or pummeled by every video bad guy that comes along. Needless to say, I do *not* walk away with the top score.

So my kids were in for a bit of a shock when they took their old dad to play *laser tag* a few months ago. If you've never heard of laser tag, it's essentially a live-action version of a First-Person-Shooter video game. You strap on a special vest that's studded with electronic sensors, arm yourself with a laser pistol that shoots low-intensity infrared beams, and hunt other players through a darkened maze. When one of your laser shots makes contact with the vest of an enemy player, you score a point, and he is electronically killed for a few seconds.

There are other elements to the game, including a variety of objectives and interactive targets inside the maze, but that's the basic idea in a nutshell. As I mentioned earlier, it's more or less a live version of a video game. In view of my general ineptitude at First-Person-Shooter games, my kids expected me to be easy pickings. But much to their surprise, I took the top score in every game of laser tag.

My son just couldn't understand it. I stink at video games. How could I possibly be so good at laser tag? I gave him the answer in two words: *cheat codes*.

About Jeff Edwards:



Jeff Edwards is a retired U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer, a Naval Warfare Specialist, and an award-winning novelist. He is currently working as a civilian expert consultant to the Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command, the Navy's think tank for high-tech undersea warfare.

His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

His first novel, [***TORPEDO***](#) won the 2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction, and the 2005 American Author Medal.

Contact Jeff Edwards at:
Author@NavyThriller.Com



Video games are loaded with short-cuts: little combinations of button-clicks and trigger-squeezes that give the player special powers or abilities. With the proper sequence of button and trigger action, you can run faster, jump higher, shoot better, regain health, or even deflect enemy bullets. My son and his friends have these short-cuts and cheat codes all figured out. They buy books containing secret game code combinations, and they trade them the way that kids traded baseball cards when I was growing up.

There are no cheat codes in the laser tag arena. There are no short-cuts. If you want to win, you have to do it the hard way. You have to shoot, dodge, take advantage of cover, move stealthily, and use real tactics against real human adversaries. If you're a lousy shot, there is no magic combination of key-strokes that will improve your aim. If your opponent out-flanks you, no amount of button-mashing will recover the tactical advantage. You either do it the hard way, or you lose the battle.

My kids have learned that lesson now, at least as it applies to playing laser tag with their old man. But that basic principle isn't limited to the laser tag arena. It applies to every battle fought in the real world, and it most certainly applies to our current conflicts in the Middle East.

An increasing number of journalists and politicians seem to believe there are cheat codes for real life warfare. Apparently, they're laboring under the impression that America is supposed to have some quick and easy way of defeating our enemies and bringing combat operations to a rapid close.

I wish there *was* a cheat code for this; I really do. Press a few magic buttons, and ... *Presto!* ... the insurgents pack up their Improvised Explosive Devices, stop massacring innocent people, and abandon their plans to oppress their fellow humans.

I'd pay to buy the book with that particular cheat code in it, no matter how much it costs. Unfortunately, this is not a video game. The blood is not imaginary, and the deaths are not cleverly-animated simulations.

In real life, there are only three short-cuts to a rapid exit from the Middle East. Option One is total and unrestricted warfare. We can destroy our enemies so thoroughly that they have neither the means, nor the will to retaliate. Some people refer to this as the 'parking lot' option, as it may actually require us to bomb Iraq until it's as flat as a Wal-Mart parking lot.

A campaign of unrestricted warfare could end the insurgency quickly, by the simple expedient of killing each and every insurgent in Iraq. Aside from the sheer inhuman brutality of such a plan, and the astronomical financial price tag, this option involves killing the general population along with the terrorists. Every man, woman, and child in the country would be dead. That's not a very attractive idea, and I don't think any sane person would seriously consider a plan of this type.

Option Two is capitulation. We can throw in the towel, pull our troops out of Iraq, and let the insurgents seize control of the country. Of course, this will also result in the slaughter of large numbers of innocent people, but at least America won't be pulling the trigger. It's also possible, perhaps even probable, that Option Two will trigger a worldwide escalation in



terrorism. If the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth cannot stand against terror, then no one can. We will be weakened; our enemies will be strengthened, and the world will face the consequences.

With some adversaries, there is an Option Three: negotiated peace. This calls for getting both sides to sit down at a table and work out some form of compromise. Ideally this is accompanied by a cease-fire, and — when the process works — the permanent cessation of hostilities.

Under the current circumstances, Option Three isn't really an option at all. We're squared off against an adversary whose publicly-stated objective is to erase the United States from the face of the planet. I may be mistaken, but that doesn't seem to offer much hope for speedy peace negotiations.

Where does that leave us? Option One is too hideous to contemplate, and our enemies have made it violently clear that Option Three is not on the table. If we insist on a quick-fix solution to Iraq, we're stuck with Option Two: tuck our tail between our legs and slink home.

The only other alternative is neither quick, nor easy. We can see the job through to its end. We can finish what we started.

As much as we might wish otherwise, the quick solution is a myth. This is the real world, and there are no cheat codes. There are no short-cuts. We either do this thing the hard way, or we lose the battle. And then things start to get *really* ugly.

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